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JESUS BEFORE CAIAPHAS.*

BY THE REV. LYMAN ABBOTT.

Jesus had been arrested at the gate of the garden of Gethsemane about midnight, and hurried to the Temple courts or their vicinity; first to the house of Annas, that the officers arresting might learn what he would have done with him; then, by his direction, to Caiaphas. In one of the rooms opening off the courtyard of the palace a preliminary examination was held. The soldiers and officers of the chief priests and their servants gathered around a little fire in a brazier in the courtyard, for it was cool. Peter stood with them. His denials, therefore, were within the hearing of Jesus and within his sight as well; and it was when Jesus looked upon him as he was led out through the open door to the council chamber where the trial was to be held, that Peter recalled the words that had been spoken, and went out and wept bitterly. While this preliminary examination in the palace of Caiaphas was going on messages were sent in haste to gather the officers of the Sanhedrim, the Supreme Court of Judaism. By 4 o'clock in the morning this court convened in the council chamber adjoining the Temple, on the 7th day of April, in the 34th year of the Christian era, for the most momentous State trial history has ever recorded.

It is necessary, if we are to understand the significance of this trial, that we understand exactly the nature of the accusation brought against Jesus. God was the head of the Jewish people. To turn their allegiance away from this their King was high treason, and was punishable with death. This was the crime of blasphemy, of which Jesus was accused. It is almost exactly paralleled by the law of England in the sixteenth century against the offense known as præmunire, at the time when the Pope of Rome claimed the allegiance of the English people, and it was made a capital offense for any man in England to attempt to divert the allegiance of the English people from the English king. So, centuries before, it had been made a capital offense for any man in any wise to attempt to divert the allegiance of the Jewish people from Jehovah, their King.

It was under this law of the Old Testament that Jesus Christ was put on trial for life. It was charged against him that he had denounced the church authorities to their face; that he had, under pretense of reforming men, gathered rabble of harlots and drunkards to follow him; that he had denounced the rich and flattered the poor; that he had denounced the Jewish law-givers and assumed to pronounce the judgments of God against them; that he had constituted himself a new king in the midst of Israel and promulgated laws as by his own authority, that he had pretended to work miracles, and yet had refused to submit them to the properly constituted authorities; that he had claimed to be the Messiah; that he had avowed himself to be greater than Moses, greater than Solomon; that he had violated and broken down the law of God; that he had abrogated the Sabbath; that he had cast scorn upon ablutions and ceremonial washings; that he had repudiated the authority of the scribes and Pharisees who were chief rulers of Israel; that he had been very lax in his attendance upon the Temple service and the Temple feasts; that he had told his disciples openly not to fast; that he had told them openly not to pray in public; in short, that he set men against the whole religious current and thought and teaching of his time, and that he had claimed a supreme authority so to do. And yet all this was insignificant compared with that which was the main charge against him—that he had claimed to stand as in the place of God; that he had averred himself to be the son of God; that he had received without objection divine honors; that he had attempted to deflect the allegiance of the people of Israel from the Jehovah of olden time to himself.

It is easy for us to imagine the evidence gathered against him. It could be proved that he claimed to be king; that he had proclaimed laws as a law-giver; that he had set himself above those of olden times, saying, "It has been said to you of olden time, but I say unto you"; that he had entered Jerusalem riding in triumph as a king, and that when men cried out after him, "Hosanna, hosanna, to him that cometh in the name of the Lord," and he had been called to rebuke them, he had refused so to do; that he had worked miracles in his own name, as no prophet had ever done; that he had prophesied in his own name, and had claimed even to forgive sins without invoking the forgiveness of Jehovah. And yet such had been the reserve of Jesus that it could not be proved that he had claimed distinctively divine character. We know now what his claims had been in the secret councils of his own disciples; but these were then unknown. Evil spirits had undertaken to bear testimony, and he had silenced them. The men he cured would have borne testimony, and he bid them not to do it. He quietly told his disciples that he was the Son of God, but bid them tell no man. With a wise caution born of foresight, he had exercised himself and had imposed on others a reserve, and had thus guarded against this hour. Witness after witness was brought—false witnesses, too, perjured witnesses; but their testimony agreed not with one another. There was, indeed, that traitor Judas, who might have been summoned to tell what had been spoken in the secret councils, but under the Jewish law one witness was not enough to condemn to death, and Judas Iscariot's testimony unsupported by other testimony would have been without avail.

The morning sun was creeping up the east. The golden glory of the coming day was flooding the council chamber. The priests and scribes began to fear that their victim would escape them, and that they would be unable to bring such testimony of blasphemy as would sustain conviction even in that packed tribunal. At last the High Priest ventured on a bold and audacious experiment. He put Jesus Christ himself on the witness stand. He administered the Jewish oath in the form in which the Jewish oath was then administered: "I adjure thee by the living God that thou tell us whether thou art the Son of God." Jesus interposed his remonstrance: "If I tell you," he said, "you will not believe. If I question you, you will not answer. If I should prove my innocence, you would not let me go." Still the High Priest persisted, "I adjure thee that thou tell us by the living God whether thou be the Messiah." Jesus might have refused to answer. He did not. "Thou shalt see," he said, "the Son of man coming in the clouds of glory to judge the world. The relations between me and you will be reversed. You will stand before my judgment bar. I will sit upon the judgment throne." The priest again persisted in his demand. "Art thou indeed the Son of God?" Jesus answered with a clear, ringing, simple statement, "I am." One may imagine the hush that fell upon the court, and the crowd outside looking in through the windows, for the moment, as the High Priest rent his clothes, as the High Priest was bound to do in conviction of blasphemy and in token of his judgment, as the English judge puts the black cap on his head when he pronounces sentence of death. And the whole court, waiting not for the secret ballot required by the Jewish law, cried out: "He is guilty of death, he is guilty of death!"

Our Christian faith, that faith which the great Evangelical Church of Christendom holds, in the divine character of Jesus of Nazareth, does not depend upon any interweaving of texts of Scripture or upon any doubtful deductions. In this supreme and awful moment of his life, when he stood face to face with death, under the solemn sanction of his oath, when he was under the highest obligation to sweep away misconstructions, if they existed—then, in that great hour, he swore before that court and high heaven, that he was the Son of God and the Judge of humanity. If this he was not, he would have been rightly adjudged guilty of blasphemy.

Lest this shall seem a forced conclusion, a picture of imagination, listen to the late Judge Greenleaf, law professor at the time of his death in Harvard Law School: "If we regard Jesus simply as a Jewish citizen, and with no higher character, his conviction seems substantially right in point of law, though the trial were not legal in all its forms. For, whether the accusations were founded on the first or second commands in the Decalogue, or on the law laid down in the thirteenth chapter of Deuteronomy, or that in the eighteenth chapter that twentieth verse, he had violated them all by assuming to himself powers belonging alone to Jehovah; and even if he were recognized as a prophet of the Lord, he was still obnoxious to punishment, under the decision in the case of Moses and Aaron, before cited. It is not easy to perceive on what ground his conduct could have been defended before any tribunal, unless upon that of his superhuman character. No lawyer, it is conceived, would think of placing his defense on any other basis."

This is the ground of our faith in Jesus as the Divine Son of God. In this supreme hour of his life, when the claim meant death to himself, when, if it were false, it meant falsity running through all human history and to all time, he claimed divinity under the solemn sanction of his oath and in the presence of eternity. There is no room to build a tomb to Jesus of Nazareth beside the tomb of Confucius of China, Buddha of India, Socrates of Greece. He was either less than a philosopher or more than a man. He was either the Son of God or to be acquitted of blasphemy only by being regarded as an enthusiast. He was either deserving of condemnation or he is entitled to the highest loyalty and allegiance that human hearts can give him.

*Examination of the testimony of the four Evangelists. With an account of the trial of Jesus. By Simon Greenleaf, LL.D.

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"International Sunday School Lesson for Nov. 3, 1889—Luke, xxii., 54-71. In treating this and the immediately succeeding lessons I shall assume that the student will get detailed treatment of Luke's specific accounts from other sources, and shall endeavor to supplement such information and suggestions by a more general treatment of the events narrated, based on the four Gospels and on other collateral and incidental information gathered from other sources.

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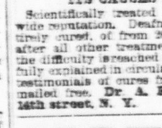

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