

BYERS SAMUEL MARSHALL

A LAYMAN'S LIFE OF JESUS

Samuel Byers
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PREFACE

Every book should have a purpose. The object of this little volume is to try and harmonize, in a sense, and bring nearer to us, the story of the Master. It is free from the fog of creed, and the simple picture of the Times and the Man may help to waken new interest, especially with the young in the greatest tale of the world.

S. H. M. B.

Des Moines, Sept. 3, 1912.

CHAPTER I

Palestine two thousand years ago. The Little Land of Galilee. An Oriental Village. The Boy Carpenter.

One of the beauty spots of the world, a couple of thousand years ago, was the little land of Galilee, in upper Palestine. That was a land for poets and painters.

Lonesome, deserted, and little inhabited as it seems now, there was a time when this little paradise of earth had many people and many handsome cities. "In my time," says Josephus, "there were not less than four hundred walled towns in Galilee." Nature, too, was lavish in its gifts to this little land. There were green valleys there, picturesque mountains, clear blue lakes, running brooks, and grassy fields. An Eastern sun shone on the province almost all the time. There was no winter there. Like a diamond in the very heart of this beautiful land sat the town of Nazareth, "The Flower of Galilee." Close by the village were the hills that fenced in the upper end of the plain of beautiful Esdralon. Figs grew there at Nazareth, and oranges, and grapes luscious and bountiful as nowhere else. The flower-lined lanes stretched from the village clear down to the blue lake of Galilee, only a dozen miles or so away. It must have been a delight to live in a climate so delicious, in a land so lovely.

It all belonged to Rome then, as did the whole country known as Palestine. The Romans had divided the land into three provinces, – Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, with its splendid city of Jerusalem, then one of the noted capitals of the world. Governors or kings were appointed for these three provinces by the emperors at Rome; they were usually Orientals.

Just now two sons of Herod the Great, oftener known as "the splendid Arab," are ruling there. The one named Herod is at Jerusalem; his brother Antipater, or Herod Antipas, is governing little Galilee in the north end of Palestine. Like many another Oriental king he is an idle, luxurious, dissipated, and corrupt ruler.

There is yet another brother of these two kings. His name is Philip, and he lives in Rome. He has a very beautiful wife, who some day is to bring great trouble on the world, for Antipater will yet desert his Galilean queen and marry this Roman beauty.

It is all in the time of the great Augustus that we are talking of now. In Rome it is called the Golden Age. It is not quite that in Palestine. Yet the world's greatest era is just beginning there. In how small a territory the world's greatest deeds are about to be enacted! Palestine, taken all together, did not make much of a country in area; many of the states in the American union have more square miles, but all the nations in the world combined have no such history. Palestine is a strip of territory reaching along the Mediterranean for one hundred and fifty miles on one side, and along the Arabian desert on the other. It is hardly over sixty miles across. It is topographically of the most diversified character. It has some beautiful valleys and purling streams; it has mountains, too, lofty and desolate, and its principal lakes are almost a thousand feet below the level of the sea. The whole land is cut in two lengthwise by the Jordan river, the most peculiar, the most rapid, and the most historic river on the face of the earth.

We are now in Galilee. In the midst of the wonderful beauty of the scene at Nazareth any one would be attracted by the appearance of a youth there who is just out of school. This Nazareth, though not His birthplace, is His home; here all His brothers and sisters and cousins live. In a village close by His mother Mary was born. The boy's own birth was at a country inn up near Jerusalem, at a time when His parents had gone there to pay taxes, and be counted as citizens of the Roman empire.

The lovely little village where this youth is, happy among His kith and kin, is not unlike many an Oriental village of to-day. Strange little stone-paved streets run into the open square where the fountain of the village is. And this is the fountain where, on summer evenings, the village girls, among them the beautiful Mary herself, came for water. The little square, and the streets, and possibly some

of the old houses, and the ruins of the fountain are there yet, in this 1912, and clustering vines and roses are still there – and so too are the clear skies, the starlit nights, the purple hills, and the dark-eyed women, just as in the long ago.

CHAPTER II

A Boy of Babylon. The Founder of Judaism. Philo, the Philosopher. An outdoor Man. The Poet-Carpenter. Staying in the Desert. The Silence of History. Where was Jesus in these silent years?

Let us go back to that long ago for a little while. At the foot of one of the little streets, close by the square and the fountain, stands a simple shop for carpenters. At the door, ax and saw in hand, we see again that Galilean youth. He is a carpenter's apprentice now, and is working with Joseph, His father. He is tall and beautiful, His eyes are blue, and very mild – His hair is yellow. He is wearing the working-man's costume common to Galileans of His age. He is perhaps twenty – handsome in countenance, and kindly beyond expression. He has long since finished with the little village school, where the tasks consisted only in chanting verses from the Scriptures with the other boys and girls of the village. But as He was apt, He has learned the Scriptures well. He knows them by heart almost; and later at the synagogue He heard the priests read from the Great Hillel, the Babylonian, who is writing and saying things about life, religion, and the Scriptures that are shaking the religious world. Philo, also, He almost knows by heart. He also knows the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon, as well as the aphorisms and maxims, the dreams and stories of great men who were writing in Palestine just before He was born. It was a day of maxims in literature. Men wrote short, strong, simple sentences, full of thought. Their sayings were easy to remember. Indeed, even to-day, there is no book so easy to commit to memory as the Bible.

The young carpenter stored them all in a retentive mind. Some day He would have use for them. At times the youth stops His work and talks with His father Joseph about the magnificent temple that Herod is just completing up there at Jerusalem. He has seen it often as a boy, and He tells of the strange questions the priests there once asked Him, and how easily He answered every one. He is talking in the peculiar Arimean dialect, a speech ridiculed in great Jerusalem, as everywhere else, outside His Galilee. Occasionally, too, He is relating to His father the beautiful aphorisms from the gentle Hillel.

And who is this wonderful Hillel of whom Testament writers and teachers say almost nothing at all? Few of the young ever heard of him. We must ask, for some have even called him another Jesus, he was so good and great. He was a very princely Jew, this Hillel, this lover of mankind, this gentle and humane reformer, whose life benefited the whole age in which he lived. As a poor Babylonian youth, he went over to Jerusalem to study under the great rabbis of the church. He soon became very distinguished, and through him Jewish life and religion were reformed. He is often called the founder of Judaism as taught in the Talmud. Herod made him president of the great Sanhedrin, with the title of prince, and the honor descended in his family. His aphorisms, his maxims, his wise sayings were known to every Jew in Palestine, and affected all Jewish life. One of his sayings was: "Do not unto others what thou wouldst not have done unto thyself. This is the whole law; the rest go and finish." Another: "Do not believe in thyself till the day of thy death." Again: "If I do not care for my soul, who will do it for me?" Still one: "Say not I will repent at leisure. Leisure may never come." And another: "Whosoever is ambitious of aggrandizing his name will destroy it." Beyond a doubt, many of the sayings of this great and gentle teacher were as familiar to the young carpenter working at His bench in little Nazareth as the Galilean's own sayings are to the youth of to-day.

Hillel was thirty years older than Christ, and survived Him ten years. Many of the heart-sayings of the Master can be traced to Hillel, to Philo, the Egyptian, or to Moses. Let us not forget that He was human – divinely so – and that His mind, like that of any other human being, was susceptible to the teachings, the sayings, the surroundings that were nearest. He not only absorbed all, He refined all.

Philo was another of the great philosophers whose works helped to influence the young Galilean. He, though a Jew, lived all his life in Egypt. There he wrote maxims worthy of the Master himself. He was twenty years older than the Galilean. He had studied Plato, and spent his life in trying to harmonize religious Greek thought with the thoughts of Moses, the lawgiver of the Jews.

We will hear little in our Testament writers of these two wise men, who must have had a tremendous influence on the youth at Nazareth. Indeed, as already said, the Testament anyway tells us not much of the life at Galilee, or elsewhere. The larger part of the Testament story relates to the deeds of the passion week, or the last days of the Master's life. One-third of the book is taken up with that single week. It has been guessed that had the details of the Galilean's whole life been written out fully, it would have made a book eighty times as big as our Bible.

The things that the Galileans heard in the village synagogue, the things that He read in the old Scriptures, all, all that found its way to the village from Hillel, from Philo, and other men renowned then, and forgotten now, were reflected in Him. More, He beautified all, simplified all, glorified all. Most of all, however, His divine instinct enlarged itself from scenes in nature. The young carpenter was a poet. No beauty of the fields, the hills, the brooks, the lovely lake escaped His eye, or failed to feed His soul. He was an outdoor man. Scarcely one of His miracles later, but would be performed out of doors. The wedding at Cana was probably on the green lawn of a peasant's home. The stilling of the tempest, the feeding of the five thousand, the transfiguration, the numberless wonders and cures in all the Galilean villages were nearly always performed out of doors. Half His parables have to do with things out of doors. To Him God was in everything – the rocks, the trees, the blue sky of Galilee, the very desolation of the Dead sea inspired Him. How often the Testament tells of His flying away from crowds to be alone with nature. Is it not altogether possible, almost certain, that these long absences were in the wilderness of the desert? His long stay in solitary places, later, communing with God at first hand, may they not account for so much of the silence of history as to much of His life? It need not seem strange to us at all. In the old Jewish days half a lifetime of contemplation in the solitude of the desert was regarded by every one a first step to leadership.

Whoever sought a high religious calling, or sought to be a founder of a new belief, went through this solitary preparation in the desert. Even Moses did it, and spent forty years as a shepherd on the plains. John did it, Jerome did it, Mahomet did it. Why not Jesus? Even great teachers of modern times locked themselves up in the desert of cloister cells for years. Savonarola did it – Martin Luther did it – Assisi did it – so did a thousand other luminaries of the religious world.

Certainly most of the Galilean's life is a blank to human history, otherwise not explained. Why should He not have been absent in some desert solitude, some wilderness, preparing for immortal deeds, immortal words? There is absolutely no other explanation for these silent years.

How little the youth at this moment is dreaming of all that future as He works by His father's side, or goes about the village encouraging and helping by His gentle smile! He is healing by His strong faith and His pure soul. The poor love Him, not yet knowing who He is. He himself does not know. We even wonder if He knows how it is that He helps so many. He is no magician, no doer of wonders just to make a show. Perhaps He only knows as yet that goodness and kindness and love and extreme faith can do everything. Anyway He is the loved of every one. How easy it all is to be loved. One can be just a carpenter, and yet by love do everything. Of all things He is a helper of the poor, the unfortunate. Sometimes the very ignorant adopt the notion that salvation is for the poor only. They, too, misunderstand and exaggerate. A little later a sect of the overzealous poor build a church on the theory that the poor only, go to Heaven. They call themselves "Ebionites," or "The Poor." Of course, these sects in a few years ended in religious suicide. They had forgotten that the Galilean could be no respecter of class or persons.

To-morrow this young carpenter, this village doctor, will again disappear in the wilderness of the desert; who knows how long? Old church writings say that He was seven years in the desert of Egypt as a child. He is used to solitude. Legends tell, too, that He studied law in these days – by

law they meant the books of Moses and the prophets. Likely enough He took the parchment rolls with Him, and in the long days there in the desert learned them all by heart. Later He will tell all the people to go and read the same great Scriptures.

What His life may have been at such times in the desert we can more than guess. It was a meditation, an inspiration. It is told of John the Baptist, whose coming birth like that of Christ was announced by an angel, that he also spent years as a hermit of the desert, and in its solitude learned a language and received a revelation not vouchsafed to ordinary man. What then must the great soul of the Galilean not have absorbed there alone with the voice of the great creation speaking to Him all the day – the night there with the "floor of Heaven inlaid with patines of bright gold, and the music of the spheres sounding in his ears forever." His was a soul to enjoy and to be inspired with such a scene.

Little as the sacred writings tell of Him, silent as history is in the Galilean days, we have other glimpses of the times, and of what He was doing, by reading the old books, now called Apocryphal, that were discarded from our present Testament in the fourth century. Why all of them were discarded, is hard to imagine; for, though buried in an ocean of nonsense and legend, there was still at the bottom of them a grain of pure gold. Besides, for over three centuries these discarded books were regarded as part of the sacred writings.

CHAPTER III

Christ still a Jew. Is the Child's escape at Bethlehem still a secret? Performing wonders. A strange age. Rome still in the thrall of Heathendom. Augustus dead. Tiberius the Awful. Palestine itself half Heathen. A Religious Enthusiast. Jesus is ceasing to be a Jew. A church tyranny. Subjects of Caesar. Human suffering counted for nothing with the Romans. The Jews are longing for the New Time when God might come and rule the world in Pity. An age of Superstitions and Magic. Laws of Science unknown. Nobody even knew that the world was round.

But let us go back there to Galilee and stay yet a while with the village carpenter. The youth is older now. Perhaps He is going back and forth between Galilee and the solitude of the wilderness. This so-called "wilderness" is nothing more than the secret hills beyond the Jordan, or the mysterious edge of the near-by desert coming up to them like a speechless sea. At this moment He is again in Nazareth, and the wondering villagers again see Him at His daily toil. He is still learning by rote the striking maxims and proverbs of the Jewish masters. He is yet a Jew. Like all Israel He is counting on the completion of prophecy; a new world is sure to come soon – and with it a king from Heaven. It will be a glorious thing, that new world, that great king. The villagers familiarly call Him Jesus – but they know nothing of the beautiful tradition of His birth – how an angel had announced it to Mary, and how His name was fixed in Heaven.

No – Mary had meditated much on the angel's visit and on what the angel had said to her, but steadily she had kept the great secret in her own heart. She had not even whispered to the villagers about the shepherds and the star at Bethlehem, nor the sudden flight of herself and the child to far-off Egypt. Why, her secrecy is just now hard to guess. Is it possible that Herod or his successor, who would have slain the child, is still watching for Him – not knowing even of the return from Egypt years ago? Even now one indiscreet word from her might cause His death. We wonder if now, on this day, there in His father's workshop, the youth dreams that some day He is to be a king, and that of his kingdom there will be no end? I think not. He is not publicly preaching now. That, Luke says, will come much later. But what delightful whisperings go about Galilee concerning Him already. Possibly these beautiful heart-stories about Himself were as familiar to the young carpenter then as they now are to every reader of the sacred book. He may have known of them, thought of them, but He, too, kept them largely to Himself. It was an age of prophecies, of dreams, of visions, of fables, and of superstitious tales. Perhaps He was waiting to see if the angel's words to Mary were to be fulfilled. Two thousand years have not dimmed the beauty of the wondrous tale told of Mary and the child. If parts of it were only the longings of a few persons' imaginations, we may never clearly know, nor is it of the least importance that we should know. The happenings at the birth of the world's great ones have little to do with the grandeur of their lives.

Yes, the young carpenter, with the tender eyes and the radiant face, may have known of some of these wonderful sayings about Himself. Mary must have told Him some of them; and Joseph working at His side must have told Him how, on His account, the little children had been murdered at Bethlehem, and how narrow His own escape had been when he and Mary and the child had hurried away to Egypt. We can imagine the wonderful incidents told by Joseph of that strange flight into a foreign country. Our Testament barely mentions it. His birth is almost the only bit of history the Testament gives us of almost twenty-five years of the Galilean's life. They went to Egypt to escape the wrath of the tyrant Herod. Old writings tell us of two, even seven, years in Egypt, and of child-miracles in that far-away land. Of all this our accepted Testament tells us nothing. Hearing that the tyrant was long dead, Joseph and Mary and the child secretly returned to the old home in Galilee.

Are they living there in secret yet – and is the new king at Jerusalem wondering if they are alive – and does he too want the child's blood in case He was not killed that night at Bethlehem, and does he wonder what became of the wise men of the east who saw the child, but dared not go back to tell it? Does he wonder if they are somewhere in hiding yet? Does he dream that this youth in Galilee is possibly the child the shepherds told of that wonderful night? Just now we still see Him standing by the little carpenter shop, ax in hand, possibly thinking of what His father has told Him of His youth; or of what Mary hinted to Him of the bright Angel of the Annunciation? Who knows? We only guess at the secret, for history, sacred and profane, has left it all a blank. We only know that it was a feeling of the whole Jewish race that an aspirant to leadership must, first of all, retire to the desert and live for years in solitude, just as Elias had done. It has been said that a retreat to the desert was the condition of and the prelude to high destinies. The Galilean knew all about these men, from Moses and Elias down to John, who found their inspiration on the desert, or in secret places. If He was not much in the desert in these unknown years, where then was He, that no one tells of Him? Was there indeed nothing for Matthew, nor Mark, nor Luke, nor John, nor Josephus, nor anybody else to write about Him? Was it all a blank these long years? If secrecy from Herod, or from his successor Archelaus, was needed – that would account for everything, even for the whole world's silence.

This retreat for meditation would not hinder that at far intervals He return a little to His home in Galilee, where we see Him now with that ineffable smile of kindness on His face and tenderness shining in His eyes. The peasants passing by are uplifted, moved by His tender compassionate look. They wonder why. They wonder too where He has been so long, and before they are done wondering He is gone. Sometimes He disappears so suddenly – it was just as if a spirit had come and gone. Is He again in His hermit cave now beyond the Jordan? Sometimes when there at home, as now, He has quietly taught the villagers of truth; He has blessed the poor; He has healed the sick; He has performed wonders, and they know not how it is done. Some day He will tell them all.

It is a strange age He has been living in. Let us look at it for a little while. This Palestine boy had been just fourteen years old when the news came that the great Augustus at Rome was dead, and that the awful and licentious emperor Tiberius was governing the Roman empire. Just now the Galilean is twenty-six, and other news comes – that Tiberius has gone to the heavenly little island of Capri in the Mediterranean sea, and is there holding a court that shall shock the world. No wonder the youth begins to think, with all His people, that God must soon send somebody to put an end to the wickedness of kings. Antipater, the idle and licentious favorite at Rome, still rules over little Galilee as governor, or king. The Roman empire is still in the thrall of perfect heathendom. There are half as many Gentiles as Jews in Palestine itself. All over the land beautiful monuments are erected by Rome to the heathen gods. The young Nazarene can walk across the hills to Sidon by the sea any day and hear the people chanting hymns to Jupiter and Apollo. As for Himself, He is still a Jew, like most of His countrymen; only now, like Philo and like Hillel, and like John and others, He is more than a Jew; He is passing out of the old doctrines of the Jewish church into the broad daylight of truth. He will yet help to do away with the Mosaic law. In a private way, yet unheard of outside of little Galilee, He himself is teaching that God is a spirit, and must be worshiped in spirit and not in form, and not in heathen idols, nor in the way they are doing it at Jerusalem. God had already become tired of the burnt offering of rams and of the blood of beasts. Isaiah had told them that, long ago. This Galilean will go on repeating it so long as He shall live. Like the great Hillel, He would teach common justice to man – love for one another – charity to all. This was to be the great commandment.

We are not sure, but in a vague way this young Galilean already feels the mantle of a prophet falling about Him. He is saying nothing exactly new to His Galilean neighbors – but He is saying it in a new and gracious way, and they listen to Him as He converses in the shop, or on the street. He sees and feels God in the beautiful nature all about Him there in Galilee, yet more He feels God in himself.

Man holds in himself tremendous hidden powers. Science is rapidly unveiling them. They were being unveiled to a degree by the Greeks even in the time of this young carpenter; but the

Jewish people neither believed in nor heeded a school that gave an explanation of things marvelous. They were set in their superstition. No book that described certain fixed laws of nature was, for one moment, to take the place of Moses and the prophets. Even the Galilean himself is clinging to these old Bible poems. It is the wrong interpretation of them, possibly, by Himself sometimes, that is driving Him to a religious rebellion.

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