

The Gospel of St. John
In Its Relation to the Other Three Gospels, Particularly to the Gospel of St. Luke
By Rudolf Steiner

An Excerpt from Lecture XII: The Decline of Primeval Wisdom and its Rejuvenation through the Christ-Impulse.

July 5, 1909

Once upon a time men possessed wisdom; but even had it been preserved, the development of the ego must inevitably have proceeded, and egotism would have grown so strong that blood would rage against blood. Blood is no longer fitted to lead men upwards when it is guided only by the ancient wisdom. And thus the clairvoyant initiate who gave us the original picture of the Oedipus legend wished to set up a warning for mankind, saying: That is what would happen to you if nothing came to supersede the old oracle wisdom. — And in the Judas legend there is preserved even more clearly an indication of what the old oracle wisdom would have led to. Judas' mother, too, was prophetically told that her son would kill his father and wed his mother, thereby conjuring up untold misery; and it all came to pass in spite of the foreknowledge. This means that the primeval, inherited wisdom is not capable of saving man from the abyss into which he must fall unless a new impulse reaches mankind.

If we now look more closely into the causes of all this we must ask, Why was it inevitable that the ancient wisdom should become unfitted to dominate humanity? The answer to this question can be found by examining nature carefully the origin of the old wisdom in its relation to mankind I have already indicated that in the old Atlantean age a connection existed between the physical body and the etheric body of man that differed greatly from the later relation. In regard to two of the principles of man's nature it can be said that the physical and etheric bodies are so related that they approximately coincide, especially in the region of the head; but this is only the case in our own time. Looking back to the Atlantean period we find the etheric head protruding far beyond its physical counterpart: the etheric body extended past the physical body,

particularly in the head region. Now, in the Atlantean epoch human evolution proceeded in such a way that the outline of the physical and of the etheric body became more and more coincident, especially in the head: the etheric body kept withdrawing into the physical body, thereby naturally altering this member of the human being.

That, then, is the essential feature of this phase of human evolution: the etheric body of the human head withdraws more and more into the physical aspect of the head until the two come to coincide. Now, as long as the etheric body was outside the physical head it was subject to conditions quite different from the subsequent ones: it was in touch, on all sides, with currents, with other spiritual beings; and the substance of what thus streamed in and out provided the faculty of clairvoyance in Atlantean times. So the capacity for clairvoyance was due to the incomplete coincidence of the physical and etheric bodies in the head region, a condition admitting from all sides currents endowing the etheric head with clairvoyance. Then followed the time when the etheric body withdrew into the physical body. In a certain way — not completely — it tore itself away from these currents; it began to cut itself off from the currents which had provided the capacity for clairvoyantly penetrating the wisdom of the world. Conversely, when in the old initiations a man's etheric body was withdrawn, his etheric head became interpermeated once more with the surrounding currents, and clairvoyance set in again.

Now, had this contact between the etheric body and the outer world been severed at one stroke, in the middle of the Atlantean age, the old clairvoyance would have vanished far more rapidly than was actually the case. No remnants of it would have remained for the

post-Atlantean time, nor would mankind of a later age have retained any recollection of it. As it occurred, however, man preserved a certain contact with the outer currents. And something else took place as well: this etheric body that had cut itself off from the currents of its environment retained, nevertheless, certain remnants of the former capacity for wisdom. Keep well in mind that at the end of the Atlantean epoch, after man had drawn his etheric body into himself, there remained in it a sort of fund, the residue of what had once come to it from without — a small saving, if I may use the term: as if a son had a father, the father is earning money, and the son draws upon him according to his needs. In the same way, man drew upon his environment for all the wisdom he needed, up to the time when his etheric body severed the connection.

Keeping to our simile, let us now assume that the son loses his father, there remains for him but a certain portion of his father's money, and he earns nothing to add to it. In time he will come to the end of it and have nothing left. That is the position in which the human being found himself. He had torn himself loose from his father-wisdom, had added nothing to it through his own endeavor, and subsisted on it into the Christian era — indeed, even now he is still living on his inheritance, not on anything he has earned. He lives on his capital, so to speak. In the earliest part of post-Atlantean development a bit of the capital was still left, though without his having himself earned the wisdom: he lived on the interest, as it were, and occasionally requested an additional sum from the initiates. But ultimately the coin of ancient wisdom lost its currency; and when it was given to Oedipus it no longer had any value: this old wisdom did not save him from the most frightful transgression, nor did it save Judas.

That is what took place in the course of human evolution. How did it come about that man gradually exhausted his capital of wisdom? Because in the past he had given access to two kinds of spiritual beings: the Luciferic beings, and later, as a consequence of these, the Ahrimanic or Mephistophelean beings. These prevented him from adding, by his own labor, to the store of old wisdom, for

they acted upon his being as follows: the Luciferic beings tended to corrupt his passions and feelings, while the Ahrimanic, the Mephistophelean beings were more concerned with outwardly distorting his view of the world. Had the Luciferic beings not intervened in Earth evolution, man would have developed no such interests in the physical world that drags him down beneath his true status; and if, as a result of the Luciferic influence, the Mephistophelian, the Ahrimanic, the Satanic beings had not taken a hand, man would know, and would always have known, that underlying every object of the senses there is spirit, and he would look through the surface of the sense world upon the spirit. But Ahriman infused into human observation something like a dark smoke cloud that prevents penetration to the spiritual. Through Ahriman's agency man is enmeshed in lies, in *maya*, in illusion. — These are the two beings that prevent man from earning any increment to the store of ancient wisdom once bestowed upon humanity; and as a consequence, this heritage has dwindled away and gradually become wholly useless.

Nevertheless, in a certain other respect evolution held to its course. During the Atlantean time the human etheric body merged with the physical body; and it was man's misfortune, so to speak — his fate — to be forced to experience the influence of Lucifer and Ahriman in his physical body in this physical world just at a time when he was God-forsaken, as it were. The result was that the old heritage of wisdom became useless precisely by reason of the influence of the physical body, of living in the physical body. How did this happen? Formerly man did not live in the physical body: he gathered his wisdom from his father's treasury, so to speak — from the ancient fund of wisdom. His source of supplies was outside his physical body, because he himself was outside it in respect of his etheric body; and this source finally dried up. In order to augment his fund of wisdom, man would have needed a treasury in his own body. But this he did not have; and consequently, in default of an inner source of wisdom, there remained less and less of it in his etheric body every time he abandoned his physical body at death. After every death, every

reincarnation, the sum of wisdom in his etheric body was less: the etheric body became ever poorer in wisdom.

But evolution advances; and just as in the Atlantean age evolution was such that the etheric body withdrew into the physical body, so future development will proceed in such a way that man will gradually emerge again from his physical body. Whereas in a former age the etheric body kept drawing into the physical — ever deeper, up to the coming of Christ — the time then arrived in which the course of evolution changed. At the moment in which Christ appeared the etheric body began to retrace its course; and already in our present time it is no longer as closely bound to the physical body as it was when Christ was present on earth. And as a result the physical body has become even denser than before. The human being, then, is moving toward a future in which his etheric body will increasingly protrude, and in time it will extend as far as it did in the Atlantean epoch.

Here we can pursue our simile a bit further. If the son, who had formerly lived on his father's fund, spends it all and earns nothing additional, his prospects will become increasingly dismal. But if this man now has a son of his own — that would be the grandson — the latter will not be in the same position as his father. The father at least inherited something and could go on spending, but there remains nothing at all for the grandson, nor does he inherit anything: for the time being he is left with nothing whatever. And in a certain way that describes the course of human evolution. When the etheric body entered the physical, bringing along a supply of divine wisdom from the treasury of the Godhead, it still provided wisdom for its physical body. But the Luciferic and Ahrimanic spirits prevented all augmentation of this wisdom in the physical body — contrived that none should be added. When now the etheric body begins to emerge again it takes nothing with it from the physical body, and the consequence is that if nothing else had intervened man would be heading for a future in which his etheric body, though belonging to him, would contain no vestige of wisdom or knowledge. And with the complete desiccation of the physical body the etheric body would be

destitute as well, for nothing could be drawn from the dried-up physical body. Therefore, if the physical body is not to desiccate in that future period, the etheric body must be provided with strength, with the strength of wisdom. Before emerging from the physical body the etheric body should have been endowed with the power of wisdom. Within the physical body it must have received something it can take out with it. Then, when it emerges — provided it has acquired this wisdom — it can react on the physical body, giving it life and preventing its desiccation.

The future evolution of humanity can take one of two courses, of which one is as follows: Man develops without Christ. In this case the etheric body could bring with it nothing from the physical body, because it had received nothing from it: it emerges empty. But conversely, the etheric body cannot animate the physical body, having nothing to give: it cannot prevent the attrition, the withering, of the physical body. Man would gradually forfeit all the fruits of his physical life: they could furnish nothing out of his physical body, which he would therefore have to abandon. But the very purpose for which man descended to earth was to acquire a physical body in addition to his other principles. The germ of the physical body originated in an earlier period, but without its actual formation man would never fulfill his mission on earth. But the influences of Lucifer and Ahriman have entered the picture; and if man acquires nothing in his physical body, if his etheric body withdraws again with nothing to take with it — having even used up the old store of wisdom — then the earth's mission is doomed: the mission of the earth within the universe would fail of fulfillment. Man would carry over nothing into the future but the empty etheric skull which had been abundantly filled when he originally brought it into earth evolution.

But now let us suppose something were to occur at the right moment which would enable man, as his etheric body emerges again, to provide something for it, to animate it, to penetrate it with wisdom as of old: the etheric body would continue to emerge just the same; but now, endowed with new life, new strength, it could employ these for vitalizing the physical body. It could send power and life

back into it. But the etheric body itself must first possess these: it would first have to receive this strength and life; and if it succeeds in this the fruits of man's earth life are saved. The physical body will then not simply decay, but rather, this corruptible physical body will assume the configuration of the etheric body, the incorruptible; and man's resurrection, with the harvest reaped in his physical body, is assured.

An impulse had thus to come to the earth through which the exhausted treasure of ancient wisdom might be replenished, through which the etheric body might be endowed with new life, thus enabling the physical element — otherwise destined to corruption — to put on the incorruptible and to become permeated by an etheric body capable of rendering it immortal, of rescuing it from Earth evolution. And that is what Christ brought mankind — this pervasion of the etheric body with life. The transformation of the human physical body that would otherwise be doomed to death, its preservation from corruption, its ability to wear the incorruptible — all this is connected with the Christ. Life was infused into the human etheric body by the Christ impulse — new life, after the old had been spent. And looking into the future, man must tell himself: When my etheric body will ultimately have emerged from my physical body, I should have developed in such a way that it is wholly saturated by the Christ. The Christ must live in me. In the course of my earth development I must by degrees completely permeate my etheric body with the Christ.

What I have just described to you are the deeper processes that elude outer observation. They constitute the spiritual principle underlying the physical evolution of the world.

But what outer form did all this have to take? What was it that entered the physical body through the Luciferic and Ahrimanic beings? The tendency to decay, to dissolution — in short, the tendency to die. The germ of death had entered the physical body. Had no Christ come, this death germ would have developed its full power only at the end of Earth evolution, for then the etheric body would be for all time powerless to reanimate man; and at the

completion of Earth evolution, that which had come into being as human physical body would fall into decay and the earth's mission itself would end in death. Whenever we encounter death today we can discern in our present life a portent of the universal death that would occur at the end of Earth evolution. Mankind's ancient heritage dwindles but slowly and gradually, and the possibility of being born again and again, of passing from incarnation to incarnation, is due to the life fund originally given man on his way. As regards his purely external life in the successive incarnations, the possibility for life to exist would not be fully exhausted before the end of Earth evolution; but as time goes on the gradual extinction of the race would manifest itself. This would occur piece by piece, and the physical body would continually wither. Had the Christ impulse not come, man would perish member by member as Earth evolution approached its termination. — At present the Christ-Impulse is but at the beginning of its development: only by degrees will it make its way among men; and only future epochs will reveal — and continue to reveal to the very end of Earth evolution — the full significance of Christ for humanity.

But the various human activities and interests have not all been affected alike by the Christ impulse. There are today many such that have not been touched by it at all, that must await a future time. I will give you a striking example of one whole sphere of human activity which at present has not been influenced by the Christ impulse at all. Toward the end of the pre-Christian epoch — say, in the 6th or 7th Century before our era — the primeval wisdom and power were on the wane in so far as human knowledge was concerned. In connection with other phases of life that wisdom long retained a fresh, young forcefulness; but it declined most noticeably in the matter of knowledge. From the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries B. C. there remained something that may be termed the remnant of a remnant. Were you to hark back even to the Egypto-Chaldean wisdom, not to say that of ancient Persia or India, you would find this wisdom everywhere permeated by true spiritual vision, by the fruits of primeval clairvoyance; and for those endowed to a lesser degree with this faculty the reports of the clairvoyants were

available. Such a thing as science other than one based on clairvoyance never existed in the Indian and Persian epochs, nor in still later times; even during the early Greek period there was no science without a basis of clairvoyant research. But then the time approached when this fading clairvoyant research was lost to human science, and for the first time we witness the rise of a human science devoid of clairvoyance — or at least, a science from which clairvoyance was gradually cast out.

Clairvoyance vanishes, as does faith in the revelations of clairvoyants; and during the 6th or 7th Century before the appearance of Christ we see established something we can call a human science, from which the fruits of spiritual research are increasingly eliminated. And this becomes ever more the case: in Parmenides and Heraclitus, in Plato and even in Aristotle — everywhere in the writings of the old naturalists and physicians — you can find ample confirmation that what is known as science was originally permeated by the results of spiritual research. But spiritual science steadily deteriorated and decreased. In connection with our psychic capacity, our feeling and willing, it still endures; but as regards our thinking it is vanishing.

Thus with respect to human thinking, to thinking in terms of science, the influence of the etheric on the physical body had already begun to wane when Christ appeared. Everything of that sort comes about gradually, step by step. Christ came and gave the impulse; but naturally not everyone accepted it at once, and particularly was it rejected in certain spheres of activity. In others it was received, but in the field of science it was positively spurned. Examine for yourselves the science that prevailed in the time of the Roman empire. Look it up in Celsus, where you can read all sorts of rubbish about Christ. This Celsus was a great scholar, but he understood nothing whatever about human thinking as affected by the Christ impulse. He reports:

“There is said to have lived at one time in Palestine a couple known as Joseph and Mary, with whom the sect of Christians originated. But what is told about them is all superstition. The truth

is that the wife of this Joseph was once unfaithful to her husband with a Roman captain named Panthera; but Joseph did not know the identity of the child's father.”

That was one of the most popular accounts of the time; and if you follow our contemporary literature you will realize that certain people of the present have not advanced beyond the standard of Celsus. Certainly there are fields in which the Christ-Impulse can take root but slowly, but among those now under discussion it has to this day found no foothold at all. There is one part of man we see withering: it is in the human brain; but when it shall have been influenced by the Christ-Impulse it will revive science in a very different form. Strange as that may sound in this age of scientific fanaticism, it is nevertheless true. That part of the brain assigned to scientific thinking is moving toward a slow death. This illustrates the gradual disappearance of the ancient heritage from scientific thinking. Aristotle still possessed a relatively large store of it, but we see science gradually being drained of it; and science, by reason of the accumulation of external data, will become God-forsaken in respect of its thinking, having nothing left of the old fund. And we see further how it is possible that, no matter how powerfully we experience the Christ, we can no longer establish any contact between the Christ-Impulse and what mankind has achieved in the way of science.