

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*PROFESSOR MAYOR AND THE HELVIDIAN
HYPOTHESIS.*

It will be remembered that in opening his criticism of my article on the Brethren of the Lord Professor Mayor laid a double charge against me : he said that I did wrong in trying to tie him down to a single quotation from Tertullian, and that I was guilty of unfairness towards him in saying that " it is on certain scriptural statements alone that the half-brother theory rests its case." This view of the matter was repudiated by him with some warmth, and he declared that while the scriptural evidence is, in his judgment, conclusive in itself, he also considers that " there is an amplitude of confirmatory evidence which we have no right to ignore." Those who have followed this discussion will be aware that the examination of the New Testament evidence has left the theory in a very nebulous condition, and that it is just such independent testimony which my critic promised that should be produced if the misgivings suggested at every turn by the detailed criticism are to be counteracted. They will therefore have turned to the August number with no less keen interest than myself to see what information relevant to the subject had been overlooked by me or wherein I had misinterpreted the testimony derivable from early Christian writers ;—only however to be met with blank disappointment. The claim made in such specific terms seems to have passed from my opponent's mind, for I find no mention of it in this part of his re-statement ; and instead of giving us abundance of evidence that the brethren were the children of Blessed Mary our author suavely informs us that he means to " consider what light we may gather from tradition upon this subject," and produces not a tittle of positive support for his contention.

But failure at this crucial point implies nothing short of

abandonment of hope to substantiate his case from non-scriptural sources. Nor does the manner in which Professor Mayor endeavours to cover his retreat avail to conceal how completely he has given up his case. Through twenty pages he writes in a scholarly but leisurely way, discoursing many interesting subjects so entirely irrelevant to the matter in hand, as, for instance, the abstrusely mystical view of inspiration deduced by Clement of Alexandria from the tradition that our Lord's nativity was *illaesa virginitate*; or the tolerant way in which Justin Martyr contemplates the possibility of converts from Judaism accepting the Messiahship of our Lord without subscribing to His miraculous conception; or again, he devotes fully a fifth of his space to the puerilities and inaccuracies of Epiphanius though he still professes to be answering my arguments, and admits that I had carefully dissociated myself from that profuse and unreliable writer: but he never attempts to get into a close grip with the question between us, nor does he show any desire to press towards a definite goal, nor to suggest to the mind of his readers any clear results to which he is leading them.

Thus there is little for me to answer, and I have no intention of taxing the patience of my readers or of trespassing on the courtesy of the Editor by following my critic in his holiday rambles among the Ebionites and the Apocryphal Gospels; but, as briefly as I can, I will examine his statements where he does trouble to deal with matter in dispute and explain why I think him to be utterly at fault in his interpretation.

Professor Mayor, with his love for having it both ways, bids me not to rely on great names, and enunciates an ideal for the historical student which is too long to reproduce in full, but of which the kernel lies in these words, *Non tam auctoritas in disputando quam rationis momenta quaerenda sunt*

and then naïvely tries to transfer three of my best men to his own side ! And how does he endeavour to rob me of them ? Lightfoot, he thinks, would have changed his mind had he lived long enough to read Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*. When Westcott said that "most probably the Epiphanian view is the correct one," he was only indicating that "he hesitatingly accepts Lightfoot's conclusion." So I suppose we ought to say that *Hesitancy*, as the chief factor in the conduct of life, forms the main argument of one section of Butler's *Analogy* ! And perhaps best of all, if Hort speaks of James as "He who was known as the Lord's brother," he was doing no more than implying a "wish to avoid all disputable matter" ; it never having occurred to that acute mind apparently that a simpler way to achieve this in a matter entirely outside his argument would have been to hold his tongue, as Mr. Rackham most provokingly has done in his excellent commentary on the *Acts of the Apostles*.

Turning aside, then, from his original purpose, my critic undertakes instead to show that "there was no original historical tradition to the effect that the brethren were sons of Joseph by a former marriage," with, however, little better steadfastness of purpose, for at the end of eight pages he reaches the wholly distinct conclusion that the Doctrine of the Perpetual Virginity at the end of the second century was "apparently unknown in the Churches of Carthage and Rome, and was only held by a minority in the Church of Alexandria, and, as far as we can judge, was discountenanced in Palestine as early as 160 A.D. by Hegesippus, in whose lifetime it had probably been promulgated for the first time by the author of the *Prot-evangelium*." This statement practically comprises all that Professor Mayor contributes to the discussion in this part of his defence of the theory, so I propose to examine its precise value historically.

But before doing so I would draw attention to my critic's

tone of assurance where everyone but he confesses to finding himself groping in the dark. Speaking generally of this period, Lightfoot complains of the "faint light which glimmers over the Church of the second century"; and, a disproportionate share of this being shed on the Church of Antioch, he says of the African Church that her "infancy is wrapt in hopeless darkness"; and of the Church of Rome that her "early history is wrapt in obscurity." And the late Dr. Salmon admirably expressed the predicament of the historical student by his illustration of a *tunnel* through which for much of the way we have to steal along, peering as we best can at ill-defined forms which may be the material we desiderate but of which we can speak with no certainty. But where all others are well-nigh baffled Professor Mayor stalks through undeterred, and because he has seen no more than they boldly declares that what is not seen is non-existent.

To come, then, to his confident and sweeping assertion, I would, in the first place, point out that in ascribing the origin of the elder brother theory to the author of the *Protevangelium* he is flying in the face of evidence accepted by himself, since Origen speaks of it expressly as *a tradition recorded in that work* (ἐκ παραδόσεως τοῦ ἐπιγεγραμμένου), and this is corroborated by its occurrence in the *Gospel of Peter*.

What, then, I have to deal with is the evidence of Hegesippus and Tertullian; the former of which I learn for the first time *discountenanced*¹ the theory; and the latter, I am told, expresses not his own opinion merely, but discloses the mind of the Western Church up to his time.

The testimony of Hegesippus. The process by which Professor Mayor reaches his conclusion that the Church in Palestine did not countenance the doctrine of the Perpetual Virginity is as quaint as it is ingenious. He first endeavours

¹ Hitherto Professor Mayor has been content to say that the language of Hegesippus is "quite consistent" with his own view.

to show that the following statement—*Jude, who was called His* (i.e., the Lord's) *brother according to the flesh*—does not imply, as Lightfoot thought it did, that “the brotherhood of these brethren, like the fatherhood of Joseph, was reputed, but not real.” This he does by asking us, apparently in all seriousness, to put it on a level with the intensely theological passage in Romans i, 3, where St. Paul, in enunciating the central truth of Christianity (i.e. the Messiahship and Divine Sonship of Christ), declares that the Lord was son of David *κατὰ σάρκα*, [and *κατὰ πνευμὰ ἁγιωσύνης* Son of God. So, he says, “If Jude were son of Joseph and Mary, he might be called *κατὰ σάρκα*, but not *κατὰ πνευμὰ*, brother of Jesus. Poor Jude! We are then to say, It is idle for him to claim to be the brother of James who laid down his life for the Lord; and no less vain is it for him to write such glowing words as these:—*Ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life*: for he still “stands without,” and the historian who is eloquent over that brother's martyrdom and extols his (Jude's) children as *Champions of the Faith* has no meed of praise for him, but can think of him as *σαρκικὸς* only, not *πνευματικὸς*!

It seems a pity to spoil all this special pleading by reminding the reader that Lightfoot's point has been avoided, the word to which he attached importance being “called” (*λεγομένου*) not that discussed above, *κατὰ σαρκά*.

Then my critic denies that the language of Eusebius is less ambiguous than that of Hegesippus: he who bade us in reading our Bibles to let “brother” mean “brother” neither more nor less,—(*uterine brothers*, he used to call them)—now blandly asks whether these men, if sons of Joseph and Mary, would not three hundred years later be quite naturally spoken of as the “reputed brothers of the Lord.”

But Eusebius does not leave us in doubt as to his attitude, as the following shows plainly enough. "This James was called the brother of the Lord because he was known as the son of Joseph, and Joseph was supposed to be the father of Christ." Few will hesitate to agree with Professor McGiffert in thinking this conclusive on the point since "had he considered James the son of Mary he could not have spoken in this way."

Professor Mayor also ignores the significance of Origen's close association with Palestine, and I think I may claim that he has quite failed to establish his case or to shake the position taken up in my article with regard to the testimony of Hegesippus.

The value of Tertullian's statements. All who have made a study of this writer know that we cannot be too cautious in building on stray words of his. "Tertullian, though a powerful, is not a fair arguer," says the Bishop of Birmingham, and does not hesitate to make the most of any word that tells in his immediate favour regardless of contingent consequences. The sentences quoted from him by Professor Mayor offer an instance of this; the man who in the year 203 revels in his distinction between *mulier* and *virgo* (*De Virg. Vel.* 6) could hardly have had in mind what he had already written some eight or ten years previously in his *De Oratione*, where he says that girls by mere lapse of age become women, "for both in their bodies and in their functions they are transferred to the class of women. None is a virgin from the time she is able to marry, since age in her hath already married its own husband, that is, time" (section 22). And further the attitude of Hilary of Poitiers warns us against too readily drawing any such conclusion as that of my critic from the words. Hilary was an enthusiastic disciple of Tertullian and incorporates in his commentary on the First Gospel part of the passage quoted by

Professor Mayor, yet we know that he was a whole-hearted believer in the Perpetual Virginity.¹

It is only necessary to add that, granting the fact that Tertullian knows nothing of the doctrine of the Perpetual Virginity, we have still to decide the question whether he or Hegesippus—or, if my critic prefers it, the Church of Carthage or Palestine—is the more faithful to historical facts. And we find that, where we can test them, Hegesippus is the surer guide. There were two theories as to the Roman Episcopate; the one, endorsed by Tertullian, that Clement was ordained by St. Peter; and the other, associated with the names of Hegesippus and Irenaeus, which gave the succession through Linus, Cletus, Clement; the latter being undoubtedly the correct form.

I would therefore sum up this question by granting that my critic may possibly be right in claiming Tertullian, in which case, in common with Epiphanius and St. Jerome, I was in error in ascribing the origin of this theory to Helvidius, and must admit that there may have been a school dating so far back as Tertullian which accepted it.

But however uncertain the position of Tertullian may be, I do not think that the main question is in doubt, for there are indications in most unlikely places of the prevalence of the Palestinian tradition. For instance there is the phenomenon of the doctrine of the Perpetual Virginity being traceable in heretical writings. Professor Mayor alludes to the *Docetic* tone of the Gospel of Peter, but does not stop to think how this tells against his case. In a review of Harnack's book on the Apostles' Creed, a writer refers to this as "a piece of evidence of immense importance."² The author argues that

¹ So too St. Augustine, a firm believer in the Perpetual Virginity, when dealing in a practical manner with the question of matrimony, declares the union of Joseph and Mary to have been a true *conjugium*.

² *Church Quarterly Review*, January 1893, p. 480.

the Perpetual Virginity as a deduction, and not a necessary deduction, from Blessed Mary's virginal conception of our Lord is in the last degree unlikely to have been first drawn in the Docetic circles from which the Gospel of Peter emanated. He goes on to say that "we seem irresistibly led to the conclusion . . . that a comparatively remote deduction from it (i.e. the Virgin-Birth) passed over by about 125 A.D. into the Gospel narrative of a heresy which . . . must have rejected the reality of the Virgin-Birth itself . . ."

We meet the same contradictory phenomenon in the recently discovered *Syr.-Sin. Palimpsest*, which reproduces a codex of the earliest date, worked on in all probability by a thoroughly heretical scribe; so much so indeed as to require very drastic treatment at the hands of the orthodox librarian, even to erasure with a knife. Yet here too the emphasis laid on the virginity of Blessed Mary is most marked: *Mary the Virgin* she is called; "as it were *κατ' ἕξοχὴν*" being the Bishop of Birmingham's comment.¹ To discuss the above phrase as a title would carry us too far afield, but I think that there is much to be said for it quite independently of Epiphanius. If I am not mistaken, the earliest writers ordinarily speak of *the birth of a virgin* without any mention of her name when treating of the Incarnation, but the term *Mary the Virgin* occurs so early as Justin Martyr when dealing with the woman in contrast with Eve.²

Nor can I enter here on a discussion of the rapid growth of virginity among women in the early Church. It is a subject which has yet to be investigated by a competent scholar. But I am confident that the explanation suggested by Professor Mayor in the last part of his re-statement will not bear scrutiny. It would necessitate our putting back the date of the Apocryphal Gospels fully fifty years, and would then

¹ Gore, *Dissertations*, p. 295.

² *Dialogue* 100.

involve us in chronological difficulties. Justin Martyr relates that in his time there were "many men and women of sixty and seventy years of age who from their childhood have been disciples of Christ, and have kept themselves virgins (*ἄφθοροι*)." ¹ But this brings us well within the lifetime of Simon, the Lord's cousin ; and it finds corroboration in the reference to the band of virgins in the *Shepherd* of Hermas ; and all glimpses we get of this state of life from the first mention in the New Testament indicate a movement as spontaneous as steady in its growth ; and no explanation can be found so simple as that offered of old, that Christian women found in the example of the Virgin that incentive to the consecration of their sex which apostolic men found in the pattern of her Son. Moreover we know that this tendency was strongly reinforced by the revival of religion in the heathen world, as is strikingly brought out by Mr. Dill in his *Roman Society*, where he shows how the whole of the religious and social instincts of our nature were in a most marvellous way being led to desire what only Christian Life and Worship could satisfy. And I do not believe that it was till the clash of such extremes as described by Epiphanius ² in both the heathen and Christian spheres that, under the influence of himself and St. Jerome and like enthusiasts, the Virginité of Blessed Mary was brought forward as a constraining motive to draw women aside from their natural vocation to the married state, instead of leaving the few to find their happiness in the more excellent way of virginity.

Professor Mayor seems to be wholly unaware how the sentiment of home and the family stands out on every page which he has written on this subject, and he writes as if religious sentiment were an evil thing. On the contrary, I am among those who believe the one to be as deep and divine

¹ *Apologia* II.

² E.g. The Collyridians and Antidicomarianites.

as the other; and so far from thinking that its presence weakens my case I have laid stress upon it. But I think that he is wrong in trying, despite Lightfoot's warning, to base its origin in this particular on the Apocryphal Gospels and to think that he has the authority of Origen for so doing.

It has been no pleasure to me to say hard things of one to whose age I owe reverence and to whose learning and industry I am indebted for help in the happiest of all study, the knowledge of the Divine Word. But I believe he is defending what is false, and that when he has found himself in a tight place he has been willing to extricate himself at the cost of fairness to myself and my cause.

Yet I am not sorry to have had to go over the ground once more. I said that the more this theory of Helvidius is studied the harder does it become of acceptance; and the shifts to which my critic is driven illustrate this. An explanation which needs such help from so able a defender stands self-condemned: and with myself it is no more a question—as it once was—whether loyalty to truth requires me to adopt it, but how much longer it can hold its place among thoughtful scholars as a reasonable explanation of what Döllinger described as one of the most difficult problems of the New Testament. “X.”

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE FORERUNNER AND THE STORMING OF THE KINGDOM.

MATTHEW XI. 7-15.

THE famous verse regarding the storming of the kingdom (Matt. xi. 12) has long been a *crux interpretum*. Wernle (*Die Synoptische Frage*, p. 66) considers that Matthew has not preserved the passage in its genuine form. Harnack (*Sprüche und Reden Jesu*, p. 14) holds that the material which Matthew (faithfully representing the Logia-Source=