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*THE INFLUENCE OF PERSECUTION  
ON CERTAIN NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS.*

OUR Lord, in the course of His teaching on persecution, warned His followers when persecuted in one city to flee to another.<sup>1</sup> Of the same tenour is the instruction given to the Twelve (and to the Seventy) to leave a place, where they were not received and could not obtain a hearing, and to depart to another, shaking off the earth beneath their feet as a testimony against their persecutors.<sup>2</sup> They were not to rush on to the sword's point, but to exercise prudence in their calling, seeking another entrance where the first was closed in their faces. Paul and Barnabas, we learn, carried out this instruction to the letter, when maltreated at Pisidian Antioch: "they shook the dust of their feet upon them and went to Iconium."<sup>3</sup>

Despite instances which suggest the contrary, it would appear that during the early centuries of the Church's history the spirit of this command continued to be obeyed. There was on the whole no disposition to court destruction at the hands of the Government. We find a Christian church in Asia Minor registered as a guild of *πορφυροβάφοι*, "dyers in scarlet": it was only to the initiated that the word, with the accent secretly changed, became *πορφυρόβαφοι*, "dipped in the crimson blood of Christ." It has been repeatedly shown, too, by Sir W. M. Ramsay, and most recently in the *EXPOSITOR*,<sup>4</sup> that throughout the life and death struggle between the Empire and the Church, ending in the compromise of the fourth century, Christianity employed cryptic symbols and language on stone. All the learning and insight of a modern savant have been required

<sup>1</sup> Matt. x. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Mark vi. 11, and parallels; also Luke x. 11 = Matt. x. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Acts xiii. 51.

<sup>4</sup> 1910, I., p. 482.

to reveal the import of certain words and symbols, which would either convey no meaning or a wrong meaning to pagan readers. It has for some time appeared to me that certain characteristics of the New Testament itself may fittingly be explained in a similar way.

It is now beyond dispute that the books of the New Testament are for the most part written in the colloquial Greek which was understood by more persons than any other language in the Roman Empire. Within the New Testament itself there are of course various degrees of culture. It is a far cry, for instance, from the exquisite rhythmical prose of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews to the rather low-class Greek of St. Mark's Gospel or the ungrammatical jargon into which the writer of the Apocalypse so often falls. But our general statement remains true. And yet there is a difference, or rather there are differences, from the ordinary colloquial Greek in these books. There is first the majesty of their theme to mark them off. There is next the Semitic background, most marked in the sayings of Jesus and in the Apocalypse, but present elsewhere also. The subtle aroma may, in fact, be said to pervade almost the whole of the New Testament, though its actual effect on the diction has been commonly overrated in the past. What would most strike the pagan reader would be the mysterious word *Χριστός*. This he would be apt, as indeed some Christians also were, to confuse with the well-known slave name *Χρηστός*,<sup>1</sup> which, like the other slave name *Ὀνήσιμος*, is in origin an adjective meaning "serviceable," "useful." But there is still another point which would mystify the ordinary reader even more, and that is the use at times of what might almost be called "cabbalistic" language. It is our thesis to suggest that this was used

<sup>1</sup> I am reminded that in pronunciation the two words would be practically indistinguishable.

intentionally in the case of certain New Testament writings, which belong to an age of persecution, in order that neither the writers nor the first recipients should fall into the hands of the government and be punished. The writings where it seems to me that this can be especially traced are the First Epistle of Peter, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Apocalypse, and the Epistle of James. It will be convenient to take these in that order, and to state in each case briefly and without much argument the situation to which it seems best to assign each.

The date of the First Epistle of Peter has been a good deal discussed. I have no hesitation in adopting the view of Sir W. M. Ramsay that it belongs to the period 70 to 80.<sup>1</sup> Against the tradition that Peter and Paul perished together in Nero's time there are several serious considerations. The counter-tradition that Peter ordained Clement is earlier than the tradition of a joint martyrdom, and it comes direct from Rome itself. Again, it is too often forgotten that Paul was a Roman citizen, and that Peter was not. Their entirely different political status suggests that they perished under entirely different circumstances: certainly, the law would require Paul to be beheaded, but a mere subject of the Empire like Peter would naturally be crucified. We are too apt to see Peter through the spectacles of the New Testament or those of the Roman Church, and to forget his legal status. Finally, the fondness for coupling saints, which has been so well illustrated by Dr. Rendel Harris in his *Heavenly Twins* and other works, has operated here too, and there is no more reason to accept the tradition of the simultaneous deaths of Peter and Paul, than there is to accept the other tradition that the two sons of Zebedee perished together, a view which lands us

<sup>1</sup> There are most cogent arguments for this date which cannot be repeated here.

in far greater difficulties than it solves.<sup>1</sup> Considering Peter, then, as the writer or the *auctor* of the First Epistle which bears his name, we regard it as written, in his capacity as the inheritor of Paul's work, to the Asia Minor churches north of the Taurus range. That the Epistle was written in a time of persecution is, I think, universally admitted: there is no need to quote passages. But why the strange address at the beginning? It is hardly adequate to explain it on the ground that the Christians are the new and true Israel and the inheritors of all the blessings promised to the old Israel. That is a truth which requires to be insisted on. Everything good in Judaism was by that time the property of the Christian Church, the Greek Old Testament included. But why not address the communities as Paul would have addressed them? The Epistle is even rather Roman than Jewish in general tone. For the strange address we find adequate explanation in the fact that Judaism was a *religio licita*, and that the Epistle pretends to be addressed to Jews, so as to hoodwink officials of the government into whose hands it might fall, either on its way to Sinope or in the course of the circular tour taken by the carrier. This, too, will be a sufficient explanation of the mysterious cipher 'Babylon' in chap. v. verse 13, which to a pagan would be absolutely incomprehensible. The beginning and the end of a letter were the special means of identification, and it is clear that the author has been very successful in concealing the real destination and purpose of his letter.

A similar explanation seems helpful in the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews. That this is an epistle, and not a theological treatise, is quite evident from such personal

<sup>1</sup> See Burkitt's *Gospel History and its Transmission*, last chapter, for the best that can be said for the view of the joint martyrdom of the sons of Zebedee.

references as "ye have not yet resisted unto blood" (chap. xii. 4), and the allusions in the last four verses of the Epistle. The view that it was addressed to Rome seems to me most probable, also that the writer and other Italian Christians<sup>1</sup> are in exile to escape persecution. I have no view as to the identity of the author, except that he was probably a Jew, but consider the work to be of about the same date as the First Epistle of Peter. The absence of all address at the beginning, so remarkable in the case of a letter, is best explained by the view that the Epistle was written at a time when it was not at all safe for Christians to send letters to one another concerning their religion, and that it never had an address. The immediate recipients knew quite well who had written it, but, as it arrived in a time of stress and strain, the identity of the author soon ceased to be known, and in the West no name but that of Barnabas was anywhere attached to it.

But of all New Testament books the Apocalypse has most to do with persecution by the Roman State, and here surely we have the most signal examples in the New Testament of the use of cipher and cryptic writing. For, apart from the use of the cipher "Babylon" (xvii. 5), which we have seen in First Peter, there are the numerous references to the Roman Empire, which are of a puzzling character, no doubt chiefly, if not entirely, because the writer intended that they should be so to all but the initiated. Surely nothing could be more significant of this than the question of the "heads" (xiii. 3, etc.), and therewith the question of the date of the work. It appears to the present writer that the latter question has been finally settled in favour of the Irenaeian date, about 96 A.D., the close of the reign of Domitian. If this be the date, some explanation must be found

<sup>1</sup> Chap. xiii. verse 24.

to suit the indications which suggest an earlier period. The author may have deliberately chosen to write as if he were referring to times past, in order to avoid legal action against him. For, if Nero were attacked in Domitian's time,<sup>1</sup> there was no danger for any one in doing so. At the death of an Emperor, all his "acts" became null and void. For instance—and this is a point to which New Testament students have hardly paid enough attention,—the edict of Claudius expelling the Jews from Rome in 50 A.D., would become null and void in 54, on the accession of Nero: in that year the Jews must have thronged back to Rome.<sup>2</sup> It would be quite easy for the author to attack Nero. The Christians in the churches of the Roman province of Asia would understand quite well to whom reference was intended, namely Domitian; and indeed there is a way to make the enumeration suit him, the method of counting only those emperors who bore the title Augustus. This title to the Christian, of course, was a name only to be ascribed to God. We do not, however, need to resort to this explanation; we are at liberty to regard the sacred number *seven* as in this case simply a round number. The obscurity of the whole work is such that no case in a law court could be founded on it.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the Epistle of James gains in clearness, if we suppose some such situation in its case. The present writer is of the number who feel that they must regard it as a product of the second century. The author may have borne the name James, as he was almost certainly of Jewish birth;

<sup>1</sup> The number of the beast (xiii. 18) undoubtedly refers to Nero.

<sup>2</sup> Amongst the few facts we can tell about the early history of the church of Rome, it is at least interesting to be able to say that all the effective members of it from 50 to 54 were Gentile.

<sup>3</sup> There are well-known cases of authors in Tiberius' time, who were prosecuted for *maiestas* on the ground of statements made by them in their books.

or the Epistle may be really a pseudepigraph. Egypt would seem to be the most likely place for the production of such a work, with its considerable wealth of learning both sacred and secular. The address of the Epistle is very nearly alike to that of First Peter, and yet it cannot be addressed to Jews exclusively. The marks of persecution are in this case not so clear, but the " trials," " testings," " provings," which form such an important part of the author's subject undoubtedly include those of persecution. The opposition also between the poor and rich has a direct connexion with persecution, because the rich, who are farther away from the kingdom of heaven, are in closer touch with the persecuting authorities, both for reasons of wealth and interest. Indeed, the second chapter explicitly refers (verse 6) to " the rich, who lord it over you, and themselves *drag you before the courts* " : they also " malign," " speak falsely of " the noble name ' Christians ' (verse 7).<sup>1</sup> This last verse is best understood of evidence given by the rich against Christians in humble circumstances in cases of trial for Christianity.

Meantime, this inquiry need not be pushed farther. Yet I venture to think that it has offered to us an explanation of a peculiar characteristic of the early Christian writings, when brought into comparison with ordinary productions of equal or nearly equal culture, belonging to the period within which they were written.

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<sup>1</sup> See also the eloquent judgment on the rich (chap. v. verses 1-6).