

# 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](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

*A NEW PATRISTIC FRAGMENT.*

It is well known that in the first centuries of the Christian Church there was a steady succession of teachers, amongst whom will be found some of the most renowned and venerated names, who held the doctrine of the millennial reign of Christ with His Saints on earth. They based their beliefs, as far as we can judge, mainly on the statements of the Apocalypse, but supported them strongly from the Gospels and from the Prophets. And it must, I think, be admitted that they have good ground for some of their interpretations, which harmonize very well with Apostolic doctrine, and dispense with the necessity for the allegorisation of many of the promises in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. Nor did they confine themselves to demonstrations from the canonical Scriptures, but in one notable instance, at least, they built up the belief in a redeemed natural order and a paradisiacal world out of an *agraphon* of the Lord Himself, who was represented as teaching the marvellous fertility of the renewed world in terms of vines with 10,000 stems, stems with 10,000 clusters, and so on, with a similar multiplication table for the produce of single grains of wheat, a parable of fertility which we are told that Judas, not unnaturally, treated with some degree of scepticism. Now whether we refer this story to the Lord, as Papias did, is not of immediate importance; what is important is to remember that Papias must have been handling early material, so that if we are not carried back into beliefs which belong to the direct intercourse of our Lord and of His apostles, or to Jewish beliefs of a day earlier than theirs, we are certainly carried back into a very early period of stratification of the Christian doctrine.

We can support this statement by a study of the legendary saying to which we have referred, which may be shown

to have been the product of a Semitic atmosphere. Any one who reads the passage in Papias to which we refer will see that the key-word to its composition is the repeated 10,000 (10,000 vines, shoots, clusters, grapes; 10,000 stalks, ears, and grains of wheat). Now this promise of a ten thousand-fold yield of corn and wine is a mere misunderstanding of a passage in the blessing of Isaac, where the patriarch foretells for Jacob and his descendants the benediction of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth, and an abundance of corn and wine. Here the word רב (abundance) has been understood as רבוי, and translated as "ten thousand of corn and wine." The parable in Papias is the explanation of the text so understood. And it must be clear, if this be the correct genesis of the passage in Papias, that we are dealing with very early non-Hellenic matter in the Christian traditions. And that our interpretation is not a product of pure imagination (I know, however, that we can prove anything by Semitic variants) may be seen from the fact that when Irenæus tells us the story from Papias and the Elders, he prefixes to the legend a long discussion of the benediction of Isaac, concluding with the words:—

"Creatura renovata et liberata multitudinem fructificabit universæ exæ ex rore cœli et ex fertilitate terræ; *quemadmodum Presbyteri meminerunt*, qui Joannem discipulum Domini viderunt, audisse se ab eo, quemadmodum de temporibus illis docebat Dominus et dicebat, Venient dies in quibus vineæ nascentur, singulæ decem millia palmium habentes," etc.

Amongst the writers who constitute the Chiliastic tradition we reckon Papias and the Elders, of whom Irenæus speaks, Irenæus himself, Nepos of Arsinoe in the third century, Victorinus of Pettau in the close of the third century, to whom Jerome adds as a leader and arch-heretic no less a name than that of Cerinthus. Whether he had any ground for this statement, we do not know; it was not

unnatural for Jerome, who regarded Chiliasm, perhaps not unjustly, as a Jewish heresy, to father it on a heretic who was supposed to represent the attitude of the Judæo-Christian Church at the end of the first century.

Let us now turn to the verification of the opinions ascribed to these Fathers so far as they can be determined from their own writings, and we shall find that almost all the Chiliastic library of the early Church has disappeared. Of the elders who followed St. John we know nothing, their great book of Gnosis is not extant. Papias is only known by an extract or two; Nepos, who wrote the Confutation of the Allegorists in defence of Chiliasm, has disappeared also; and the commentary of Victorinus is only current in the reformed dress which Jerome gave it, of which presentation Chiliasm is no feature, though we know from Jerome's own confession that Victorinus was a Chiliast, and therefore could not have commented on the Apocalypse without disclosing his true opinions. We are left, therefore, with little more than the passages of Irenæus, in which he defends the ancient (and perhaps at one time universal) Chiliastic belief of the Church. In view of this unhappy poverty of materials for the reconstruction of primitive Christian beliefs, it seems to me to be matter of great satisfaction that Prof. Haussleiter, of Greifswald, who is occupied with a new edition of Victorinus for the Vienna Corpus of Latin Fathers, should have discovered the closing portion of the commentary of Victorinus in the original form, apparently with no corrections from the hand of Jerome, and with abundant Chiliastic references and arguments. His announcement of the find may be read in the *Theologisches Literaturblatt* for April 26, from which we gather that the MS. which furnishes the new material is in the Vatican Library (Codex Ottobonianus latinus, 3288A). If one can judge from the sample which Haussleiter gives, the MS. in question must be one of the most corrupt texts in existence,

worse even than the Muratorian Canon, which is the ugliest piece of patristic Latin that one has to read. The transcription seems to have been made by a scribe who was unacquainted with the nature of the abbreviations in the book before him, and not well acquainted with the language in which the book was written, so that he seems often to have confused letters formed by vertical strokes and similarly with the rounded letters, the result being something fearful and wonderful. To the task of decipherment of this corrupt fifteenth-century text Haussleiter has set himself with great courage, and the result of his investigation (incomplete though it necessarily is at present) will be to set before us a piece of Latin commentary on the Apocalypse, full of early turns of speech and archaic interpretations which may be safely set down to Victorinus. Some of his corrections are very felicitous, for example :

Post mille annos dimitti propter gentes, quae *seminent antihasto* (read *seruient antichristo*).

Luminibus solis non esse propter animatiorem gloriam. Agnus enim, inquit, id est Deus lux eius est—

for which we should restore

*lumen ibi solis non esse; propter agni maiorem gloriam. Agnus enim, etc.*

These extracts will show the textual confusions with which the editor has to deal. We make a further contribution to passages which he has failed to read correctly :

Nos qui vivimus simul *ragonemus* cum eis in nubibus in obviam *domino erimus*.

Haussleiter reads *rapiemur* for the corrupt word *ragonemus*, but he rejects *erimus* at the end of the sentence; wrongly, I think, for the word is an indication that a sentence has been lost by transilience; we should read :

domino [et sic semper cum domino] erimus as in 1 Thess. iv. 18.

In the following sentence from the MS. :

In hoc regno promisit se dominus *rediturum* pro *annis* quibus comedit lucusta et *vruhus* et *corruptelia*,

the editor rightly corrects the spelling *rediturum*, recognises the Greek idiom in *pro annis quibus*, but makes a wrong correction of *annis* to *omnibus* (= *περὶ πάντων ὧν*), restores for the unintelligible *vruhus* the word *scorpius*, wrongly, as I will show, and finally emends the spelling of the concluding word to *corruptela*. But he does not recognise that Victorinus is quoting from Joel ii. 25, and that the proper word to restore is *bruchus* (the winged locust?). And since the text of Joel is a reference to the years which the locust has eaten, it is evident that *annis* must not be corrected to *omnibus*; *pro annis quibus* is the exact rendering of the LXX. ἀντὶ τῶν ἐτῶν ὧν κατέφαγεν ἡ ἀκρίς καὶ ὁ βροῦχος κτέ.

Other suggestions might be made: for instance the MS. tells us—

Hoc loco *videbant famem contra famem*,  
et unus alterum non requisivit—

the editor omits the underlined words, having failed to decipher them; read—

*videbunt facie[m] contra faciem*,

and make the reference for the first part of the sentence to I Cor. xiii. 12, and for the latter part to Isaiah xxxiv. 16.

I am not, however, writing these few pages for the sake of exhibiting textual corrections which will be sure to be made presently, but to draw attention to Haussleiter's notice that in this recovered fragment of Victorinus we are face to face with earlier material borrowed from either Papias or the book of the Elders. And in either case the suggestion is so important and the evidence for it is so strong that patristic scholars will do well to pay early

attention to it. If I remember rightly, St. Jerome says in one place that Victorinus in his *Comments on Genesis* followed Origen so closely that it was more like a translation than an original work. It is very interesting, therefore, to have our suspicions aroused as to the existence of common matter with Papias or the Elders, which may be extant in a form not very remote from the original. The proof of the borrowing must be left until Prof. Haussleiter's edition comes out; but in the meantime he has published sufficient text to enable us to recognise that the writer was following a biblical argument for Chiliasm which made the same quotations as Irenæus, and was in harmony with the interpretations given by that Father. At the same time, it is pretty certain that he is not retailing Irenæus, of whom he shows himself, as far as we can judge at present, quite independent.

It is interesting to see the arguments which the Chiliasts employed in defence of what their critics called "the thousand years of carnal delight on earth." One of these arguments was based upon our Lord's words at the Last Supper, "I will not drink any more of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." "In this kingdom," says Victorinus, "they will drink wine. Our Lord made mention of this kingdom before He suffered." The inference is that He was not speaking of the world to come. A reference to Irenæus (lib. v. c. xxxiii.) will show the same argument: the chapter opens with—

Propter hoc autem ad passionem veniens ut evangelisaret Abrahæ et iis qui cum eo apertionem hereditatis, cum gratias egisset tenens calicem, etc. ;

and it ends with the Chiliastic comment—

Carnis enim proprium est et non spiritus qui ex vite accipitur potus.

I think it will be recognised that the prospect of a closer

acquaintance with the proof-texts and arguments of Chiliasm will throw much light on the history and on the party lines of the earlier Church.

There is one other very important remark of Prof. Haussleiter to which attention should be drawn: he points out that a comparison of the Hieronymized text of Victorinus with the recovered fragment shows that Victorinus had a different interpretation of the four living creatures in the cherubic chariot to that which was current in Western MSS. and Fathers. He interprets the Man, Lion, Ox and Eagle of Ezekiel's vision to prefigure the four Evangelists; but instead of representing St. Mark by the Lion and St. John by the Eagle, he reverses the symbols. St. Jerome corrects his text, but it is clear that Victorinus had an older form of the interpretation of the living creatures. Not only so, but, as Haussleiter points out, Irenæus shows traces of an acquaintance with the form given by Victorinus; for he takes the figures of the four living creatures as given in the Apocalypse (in the order Lion, Calf, Man, Eagle) and interprets them of the four Evangelists (in the order John, Luke, Matthew, Mark), and especially speaks of the winged and flying form of the Gospel of Mark. And it will be seen that very interesting questions arise in connexion with the proof that there has been a revision of the symbols assigned to the four Evangelists.

In the first place, there is a probability that the identification of the four Evangelists with the four faces of the Cherubim is not, as is commonly supposed, a piece of ingenuity due to Irenæus; it has the appearance of coming from an older and earlier stratum, in which case the quadriform character of the Gospels must have been recognised before the time of Irenæus.

In the next place, it is singular that the order of the Evangelists in the earliest MSS. shows a misplacement of St. John and St. Mark exactly consonant with the interpretation



of the symbols. In most MSS. we have Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, but in Western MSS. we have Matthew, John, Luke and Mark. There is ground, then, for a suspicion that the Western MSS. preserve the original order of the symbols, in which St. John is the Lion and St. Mark the Eagle: but the interpretation involved in this order is practically unknown in the West. The Western order of the Gospels can hardly be due to interpretations borrowed from the chariot of Ezekiel, and it is open to suspicion whether it may not turn out to be the primitive order. The importance of these considerations will not escape textual critics.

J. R. HARRIS.