

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 Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ART. VI.—DR. PLUMMER'S "CHURCH OF THE EARLY FATHERS."

The Church of the Early Fathers.—By ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D.
Longmans, Green, and Co., 1887.

THE long list of authorities with which Dr. Plummer prefaces his "Epoch," represents but a very small portion of the works which have been written on the interesting subject which has been assigned to him. The number of these is indeed Legion, and in this there is nothing to wonder at. For what can so deeply interest a Christian and a Churchman as the beginnings of that wonderful organization, which, commencing with powers apparently so feeble, progressed with such amazing vigour and success; absorbed into itself the highest intellects, the most pure and elevated lives; adapted itself to the poor and unlettered, as well as to the most cultivated intelligences; and finally subdued the powers of the earth, and seated itself on the throne of the Cæsars? This must needs be the most interesting of histories, as in some respects it is also the most obscure. Dr. Plummer says very well: "It is a history which, so to speak, runs under ground. We read it as we read the geological history of this planet, rather in its effects than in its operations. If we set aside the traditions of later ages, most of the Twelve are mere names to us. And even these traditions are in the majority of cases very meagre." There was no contemporary historian to record the progress of Christianity. The earlier Fathers were occupied in disputing about the matters which concerned the faith, each in his own sphere. They could take no general view of the progress and fortunes of the whole Church. They were assailed on the one side by heretics, on the other by persecutors. Many of them believed in the nearness of the Second Advent. None of these conditions were favourable to writing history, and had not Eusebius in the fourth century set himself to gather up with admirable diligence all the fragments which he was able to discover, the earlier days of the Church would have been shrouded in a thick darkness. But even if that were so—even if we knew nothing personally of the great Christian athletes of the second and third centuries—yet still their work would testify for them. What the early Christians were—what the power of their preaching, and, above all, the power of their lives were, is shown by the rapid universal diffusion of the religion of Christ. Dr. Plummer perhaps a little overrates the rhetorical expressions of the Fathers, which speak of the early wide prevalence of the faith; but we fully agree with him that, after making all the necessary deductions, "there is an irreducible minimum of very large amount. Some-

thing not very much less than what is told us by these writers is required to account for the panic and frenzy with which the heathen themselves, and especially the Roman Government, regarded the new religion, and to explain the early date of its final success." Gibbon's famous "five causes" for this success are quoted, and their inadequacy is well shown. The criticism of Milman is given, which shows that Gibbon confounds the origin and propagation of Christianity with its further progress; and the acute remark of Dr. Newman, that even if the five causes accounted for the spread of Christianity, how are we to account for the *combination* of these five causes? The writer then proceeds to give in a more Christian fashion the causes of the rapid spread of Christianity. Apparently he feels obliged to content himself with *second* causes, but even among these we should hardly be inclined to reckon the Macedonian conquest and the worship of the Roman Emperor! We like Dr. Plummer better, and we think no part of his book more excellent than where he so happily sets forth the characteristics of the universal adaptability of the Christian faith (pp. 17-20).

In the third and succeeding chapters Dr. Plummer gives some account of each of the great centres of Christianity, or main and leading churches, in the second and third centuries. This part of his work is no doubt valuable, but it is inevitably dry. Sometimes, indeed, it becomes mere cataloguing—fortemque Gyan, fortemque Cloanthem—and it seems somewhat of a pity that he should have crowded his pages with insignificant bishops, when we find that on arriving at a name about which there is something to say, he can sketch so admirably, and give us such graphic portraiture in such well-chosen diction. Thus, Origen, the twice excommunicated, the wild dreamer, the father of the "higher criticism," the audacious speculator, the universalist whose works have been condemned by numerous Councils, comes out in his hands in most attractive guise. He quotes of him the description given by Gregory Thaumaturgus:

No sooner had he and his mother come within the magic influence of Origen, than they were caught like birds in a net, and could neither get on to Berytus, where he had intended to study law, nor home to Neo-Cæsarea. The great teacher held them spell-bound. By a kind of divine power he fairly carried them away. He urged them to study philosophy; it was no true piety to despise this gift of God. He instructed them in natural science; the universe was to be contemplated with rational admiration, not with unreasoning amazement. Above all, he taught them to know themselves; without that knowledge all else was of little avail. Dialectics, physics, ethics, that was the *trivium* by which he trained them for the crowning science of theology. Gregory sums up the charms of the teacher in one word, "He was truly a *paradise* to us."

Three characteristics [continues Dr. Plummer] stand out conspicuous in Origen: the noble simplicity and unruffled calm of his life, often in the midst of the most irritating surroundings; his intense interest in in-

tellectual pursuits, especially in whatever could throw light on revealed religion; and his enthusiasm in imparting knowledge to others respecting the Word and the Works of God. His philosophy is a hope and an ideal rather than a system. He furnishes his opponents with weapons for attacking him, keener than they would themselves have forged, and sometimes he furnishes the enemies of the faith with such. But in spite of serious errors here and there, he has laid down the true lines on which the Christian Apologist must defend the faith. Origen was the author of great writings and great deeds, but he himself is greater than both. We feel it as we study his writings and read his life. He gave his disciples, he gives them still, not warning, not opinions, not rules, not advice, but himself. It is his own large heart and mind, his love of all truth, his yearning after the Divine, that he has communicated to Christendom. His errors have two main sources. He is wanting in historic feeling, and he attempts to solve the insoluble (pp. 80-82).

There are many other excellent character sketches in this little volume, but we must content ourselves with drawing attention to one more. Tertullian, the stern African presbyter, the harsh ascetic, fiery denouncer, the self-confident and bitter foe of all that stood in the way of his eager advance, is very well delineated, and a comparison is instituted between him and Origen which is very striking:

Both were highly original, and in ability and influence were incomparably the leading Christians of their time. Both led lives of the strictest self-denial and great literary activity, producing writings which have been an abundant source of enlightenment, edification, and perplexity to the Church. Both were staunch defenders of the faith against heathen, Jews, and heretics, and alike by precept and example taught others to be willing to suffer rather than to compromise it. Yet both spent the latter portion of their devoted lives cut off from the greater part of Christendom, and in an attitude of opposition to those in authority over them. These points of marked resemblance are on the surface, but there are points of still more marked difference which lie deeper. The gloomy fervour of the stern African was doubtless in his blood; whereas the "sweetness and light" of the lovable Alexandrian was an unbroken development of Christian graces. Akin to this difference is the contrast between the dogmatic positiveness of the one, and the speculative suggestiveness of the other. Both in form and spirit the writings of the two, even on similar subjects, are widely different. In the one writer truth is in danger of being strangled in the letter, in the other of being lost in lofty aspiration. To the moral despair of the world Tertullian offers sternness, to its intellectual despair a scoff. Origen has deep sympathy for both—the sympathy of a self-sacrificing life, and of an undaunted search after truth (pp. 117, 118).

Before parting with this excellent little book we feel bound to notice one or two statements in which we cannot agree with Dr. Plummer. At page 34 he tells us that the study of Scripture in the Syrian Church resulted in a special type of *text* which is commonly known as Syrian—the basis of the so-called *Textus Receptus*, which is now admitted to be very corrupt (p. 34). This "Syrian Text," and all that has been made to depend upon it, is, in fact, a mere dream. "Never was there

such an attempt before made to foist such pure fiction into history." And the treatment of the *Textus Receptus* at the hands of these scholars, who were unfortunately able to impress their views upon the Revisers, has been to mutilate or altogether remove some of the most striking passages in the New Testament. Another point which we think suggests somewhat unfavourable criticism occurs in what we must call the very meagre account of the ancient British Church. Dr. Plummer writes as though he wished to disparage the British Church, and makes the statement that Eusebius omits Britain (p. 138). But in the note he quotes one passage where he speaks of it, and he has also forgotten to quote two passages in the "Life of Constantine" which allude to the early Christianity of Britain. These, however, are slight blemishes. As a specimen of excellent historical argument we would refer to chapter vi., in which the author dissects the early history of the Church of Rome, and shows it to be Greek in its origin, almost Presbyterian in its earlier constitution; with no claim to dictate to other churches; owing as much, if not more, to St. Paul than to St. Peter; not without its heresies and schisms, and without any trace of being regarded by other Churches as the mother and mistress of all. Of the Synod of Sinuessa, at which it was said to have been determined by three hundred bishops that the Pope could only be judged by himself, he says that it is a clumsy fable, whose object is to bolster the claims of the Pope to be above law. It was probably forged about 500 A.D. Of the four Councils said to have been held at Rome in the second century it is said, "All these were probably fictitious. There is no sufficient evidence of any of them." In conclusion, we must say that in our judgment Dr. Plummer has accomplished his task excellently well, and brought into a small compass a great mass of information; and, what is more, has contrived to handle his subject, for the most part, in so attractive a way as to ensure his useful statements being read and digested.

CANON.

Correspondence.

"SHILOH."

To the Editor of THE CHURCHMAN.

SIR,—Dean Perowne has, in nearly five pages of small type, replied to my briefer paper. If I were to examine as minutely every point of his reply, I should have to ask at least as much of your space, but I shall be satisfied if you can permit this shorter response on some denials and questions. I mentioned as a "fact" that "the earliest known Hebrew