

The Blood=Accusations against the Jews in Southern Russia.

BY J. RENDEL HARRIS, LITT.D., LL.D., DOC. THEOL. (LEYDEN), DIRECTOR OF STUDIES,
WOODBROOKE SETTLEMENT, BIRMINGHAM.

IN connexion with the recent trial of the man Beilis on a charge of ritual murder, it was a natural comment, on the part of those who watched the legal proceedings from the standpoint of Church History, that the Russian courts of law furnished the closest parallels to the situations of the Christian martyrs before the Roman courts and in face of actual or intended popular émeutes. One has only to read the accusations through which the Early Church had to pick its way, of eating or employing ritually the body or the blood of a child, to be sure of a real continuity between the blind popular passions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and those of the second. The parallelism is well known and has, no doubt, often been remarked. So much, at least, is clear, that the poor Russian Jews of to-day have to go through experiences which are singularly like those which we read of in the story of the Saints and Martyrs of the first days of the Church.

It will illustrate this parallelism for those who may have given it only a superficial attention, if I transcribe some sentences from a Jerusalem paper which reached me recently, containing, under the date October 14, 1913, an account of the indignation meeting held in the great synagogue on October 8 to protest against the abominable conspiracy at Kieff from the point of view of an outraged Judaism. After a solemn public oath had been taken that neither the Jews of to-day nor their forefathers knew the slightest ground in history for the charges made against their compatriots, the Chief Rabbi addressed Heaven itself in protest, in the following terms:

'O Great God, Thou knowest that even the blood of bullocks is abhorrent to us, how much more the blood of a human being! We pray Thee, therefore, frustrate the wicked designs of our enemies who purpose to throw a slur upon our holy religion—a religion which is to serve Thee in purity and singleness of mind.' The account goes on to say that many of the Rabbis wept bitterly at the irony that Judaism, the simplest

and most rational of all monotheistic religions, should be so heartlessly libelled and maligned by the wicked Gentiles.

Now suppose we turn to the account of the martyrdoms at Lyons and Vienne, as sent by those churches to their kinsmen and fellow-believers in Asia in the year 177 A.D. In this letter we find that during the process of the trial a woman named Biblias, who had at first renounced the Christian profession, when she heard the charges made against her former companions cried out in the face of the court, 'How is it possible that these people should [ritually] eat children, to whom [in ordinary life] it is forbidden to eat even the blood of the lower dumb animals?' Her question brought a personal challenge to herself, which resulted in the recovery of the Faith by confession, and she was promptly added to the list of the martyrs.

The parallel between the language of the Chief Rabbi at Jerusalem and the Christian woman in Gaul is very striking. I adduce it, not because it brings anything fresh to the argument (for, as I have said, in the story of Ritual Murders, the Jews and the Christians stand or fall together), but in order to make one or two brief reflexions which may stimulate to further inquiry. It is evident that the Gallic Christians of the second century were not so far removed from their Jewish nucleus and origin that they did not share a taboo, which has been characteristic of Judaism all through the ages. If we are historically near to one another in the possible incidence of a persecution connected apologetically with a food-taboo, it is to be regretted that spiritual consanguinity was not so far recognized in Jerusalem last October as to bring the Greek and Latin Patriarchs into the protest meeting with the Chief Rabbi. Leaving that point on one side, it is clear that *the Gallic Churches had the blood-prohibition in the Jewish sense.*

The importance of this lies, in the first instance, in its bearing upon the terms of the Jerusalem

Concordat which we have recorded in the fifteenth chapter of Acts. Here we are told to abstain from things offered to idols, and from blood and things strangled, and from fornication. It is well known that these regulations are a battlefield both for the textual critic and for the exegete. Ought we to omit the words 'things strangled,' and interpret the rest of the restrictions as belonging to the deadly sins, Idolatry, Murder, and Fornication; or may we treat them, for the most part, as a series of Food-taboos? We may take it as certain that the Gallican Christians had the Biblical text of Irenæus (who was perhaps the very scribe of their famous epistle), which is substantially the text of the Codex Bezae. This Western text certainly omitted the words 'and things strangled.' What then becomes of the food-taboo? The answer seems to be that it was involved in the abstinence from blood. Otherwise it is not easy to see how Biblias could have used the language of prohibition almost in the very words of the Chief Rabbi of to-day. 'Blood' must be held to include the blood of 'things strangled,' in which case the latter explanation becomes a gloss upon the former.

There is, however, another direction in which we can get light upon the question whether the food-taboos are the backbone of the Jerusalem Concordat; I mean the study of comparative religion. The primitive Christian and Jewish taboos are not alien to the general line of human development; they concur, in some respects, for certain, with the religious restrictions of advancing civilization. In this direction, I have been surprised that no one (as far as my knowledge goes) has compared the important parallel in the fifth Sura of the Koran: it runs as follows:—

'Ye are forbidden to eat that which dieth of itself, and blood, and swine's flesh, and that on which the name of any besides God hath been invoked; and that which hath been strangled . . . and that which hath been sacrificed to idols.'

Here we have an almost exact series of parallels to the terms of the Jerusalem Concordat; yet there is not the least reason to suppose that Mohammed has been reading the Western text of the Acts, or adding as a supplement 'things strangled' out of some other text; and it is im-

portant to notice that they are all food-taboos: 'ye are forbidden to eat' is the preface and prologue. With Mohammed, 'blood' in this connexion does not mean murder: it means the eating of blood, either in ordinary life or ritually; and I want to ask the question of those who are engaged in the perplexing task of interpreting the Apostolic Decrees whether they have given sufficient (or any) weight to the parallel supplied by the Koran; and whether the Moslem language does not go far towards establishing the statement that the trouble in the Early Church was over the food-taboos, what we may or may not eat, and the people with whom we may or may not eat it.

It will, also, probably follow that the whole question of ritual murder must be taken into a new field. Up to the present time it has frequently been suggested that the origin of the Christian persecutions was due to a misunderstanding as to their eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man. If that were really the case, then, in historically transmitting their sufferings to the Jewish race, the early Christians would be making them vicarious sufferers for Jesus Christ, and, as Browning might say, 'Kieff makes amends for Calvary.' I do not, however, myself believe that this is the real solution, though I have said enough to show that we and the Jews are standing in the dock together, and can hardly have separate trials or verdicts. Having said so much, I shall not be misunderstood in asking that the whole question of ritual child-murder should be re-opened. We know so much more than we did of the persistence of ancient customs, including the various forms of human sacrifice, that we have a right to inquire, from the human standpoint, whether such ancient customs, either in their original savagery, or in politer modifications, may have coloured the rituals of the great monotheizing religions; for even if we grant the purity and simplicity of early Judaism and its daughter faith, early Christianity, the pagans may still have had knowledge of surviving cults and practices which they may have attributed to the nascent Christian movement or to the venerable Jewish faith from which it emerged. On such points, then, we reserve our judgment (being anthropologists as well as believers) and ask for further information.