

ART. V.—THE FRAGMENT OF THE GOSPEL  
OF PETER.

THE second century was a period which is full of interest to the student of the early history of Christianity. The excitement and glamour consequent upon the personal contact with those who had known, or even seen, the Christ was over. The Apostles of Christ had all passed away, and of the immediate disciples of the Apostles themselves only Polycarp was then living.

By this time the tide of Christianity was flowing across Europe, and Gaul was under episcopal authority. Rome was the heart and centre of intellectual and spiritual Christian life, and though St. Paul had long since died a martyr's death, yet his missionary spirit seemed to have been left as a precious legacy to the succeeding generation. Look round the shores of the Mediterranean in the middle of the second century, and see how they literally bristled with Christian fortifications. There was Alexandria, with its vigorous Church and its Christian institutions; there was Antioch in Syria; there were the seven Churches of Asia Minor; there were Corinth and Athens in Greece; Carthage in Africa, and Lyons in Southern Gaul. Already Rome was rapidly becoming the centre to which other Churches turned, as being the centre of the world where all civilized men met.

It was particularly a period for organizing and consolidating. The work was growing apace, the Churches were in constant communication with each other both personally and by letter. The danger before the Bishops was that in the exuberance of their enthusiasm the people should run away with individual and pious opinions instead of historical facts, and should not be definite enough in their teaching. One sees the need and reason for the dogmatic literature of the immediately succeeding period.

It was a period of persecution also. Trajan began it in A.D. 115, when the good Bishop Ignatius laid down his life in Rome, to be followed by the venerable Polycarp at Smyrna. When the century closed there was savage persecution raging at Carthage, and Alexandria was beginning to suffer in the same way.

It was the time for Apologies likewise. Rome assailed Christianity by fire and sword, determined to stamp it out at all costs, and the pens of her theologians were up and ready to defend her. There is the Apology of Aristides, the Athenian Christian philosopher, which leads the way, and many others followed.

Heresies, too, sprang up in the second century, foremost among which was Gnosticism. The Gnostics have been described as "bankrupt philosophers who refloated their philosophy on Christian credit." They reasoned that the Unknown Deity was beyond the possibility of human thought, so encircled was he with immensity; yet he was in essence the first link in a chain of spiritual existences which, including the Father and the Son, and passing through lower spiritual forms, ended in Achamoth—a being imperfect enough to form and bring into existence this imperfect world with its imperfect human beings. Such was the daring heresy put forward by Valentinus, the Apostle of the Gnostics.

The second century produced writings which are alluded to, and often even quoted, but the originals of which are many of them, alas! lost. Very little has survived of the mass of Christian literature of that period; but all that has reached us points significantly to the fact that by the end of the first century the four Gospels were in full use in the Christian Church at large, and also that no other historical basis underlay the pseudo-Gospels, uncanonical Epistles, Apologies, Preachings and Apocalypses than that of the Gospels. The second century produced a Commentary on the Gospels, showing that they must have been widely used; the fourth century produced a Commentary on that Commentary.

Among the most interesting documents of this period are "The Passion of St. Perpetua" and "The Scillitan Martyrs at Carthage" (A.D. 180-200).

"The Apology of Aristides," the Greek Christian philosopher, is more the utterance of his deepest convictions than a treatise containing deep philosophic thought. It was the appeal of the early Church to Imperial Rome.

A few years later, and Justin Martyr of Samaria put forward his great appeal for Christianity to Antoninus Pius and the Roman Senate.

Then, as the last years of the second century were closing in, the gentle, reasonable, lovable Clement, Bishop of Alexandria, and Tertullian, the fierce combatant of Carthage, both issued their Apologies for the faith.

At Antioch, Theophilus the Bishop wrote in A.D. 180 his Apology, hoping to win over a heathen friend.

Irenæus, Bishop of Lyons, the disciple of Polycarp, who himself was taught by St. John, and who drew his Christianity from Asia Minor, wrote powerfully upon the historic value of the four Gospels.

Tatian, the friend of Justin Martyr, the Assyrian Christian, the writer of the "Diatessaron," like many another early Christian, found his way to Rome, where he spent many

years working in a good cause. Theodoret, Bishop in Syria and a scholar, testifies to the great use made of this work; in fact, in some churches it was substituted for the Gospels on account of its conciseness, and on that score had to be removed.

Hermas, a Roman, and brother of Pius, Bishop of Rome (A.D. 140-150), wrote "The Shepherd," which is an allegory told in three visions. It is not unlike Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress." Then followed Papias, from whom we learn that St. Matthew's Gospel was written in Hebrew, and that St. Mark wrote down St. Peter's reminiscences.

Finally, there are the Apocryphal Gospels—none of them complete Gospels—most of them records either of the Nativity or Passion. There are three Nativity Gospels—those of Thomas, Pseudo-Matthew, and the Arabic Gospel. Roughly speaking, they represent Christ as a wayward, all-powerful child, punishing his comrades with death for matters of personal irritation or an insult, and annoying his school-masters. The Pseudo-Peter and the Gospel of the Hebrews were the best known of the Crucifixion Gospels, and of these two the latter was by far the best known in ancient times. It was written in Hebrew, and used by Christians speaking that tongue. Zahn thinks it is probably older than A.D. 70. It has disappeared, but, though lost, has left traces of itself in early Christian literature. Clement of Alexandria mentions it, so does Origen. Eusebius says that Hegesippus (A.D. 160-170) made use of it; fragments of it are preserved in St. Jerome's writings, and they show it to have been closely allied to St. Matthew; in fact, Jerome once thought it was the original of Matthew. There are in all twenty-three fragments of the Gospel according to the Hebrews, fifteen of which have been quoted as variant readings or additions to the text of Matthew. Jerome translated it into Greek and Latin, but for all that it has long ago disappeared.

The Pseudo-Peter, from whose Gospel there existed in early writings no certain quotation, but whose evangel is mentioned once in the second century, once in the third, and again in the fourth by Eusebius, has lately been recovered by the excavator's spade, and is well worth a little consideration. It is specially interesting as showing traces of Gnostic heresy.

Midway between Assiût and Girgeh, at a little distance from the Nile bank, stands the thriving market-town of Akhmîm. It is the site of the ancient Egyptian city of Apu, the home of the worship of Amsu, the life-giving principle, and it was one of the oldest cities of the Thebaid. It is identical with the Khemmis of Herodotus (ii. 91), the Pano-

polis of Strabo (xvii. 812), and is known in Coptic literature as Chmîm, or Shmim. In olden days the inhabitants of Apu were noted as workers in stone and weavers of fine linen, and the modern traveller may see carried on in the houses of Akhmîm the manufacture of those bright-coloured cotton shawls fringed with silk that are usually worn by the Nile boatmen. Moreover, we learn from Herodotus that the inhabitants of Khemmis were less narrow-minded than the rest of their fellow-countrymen, for they made but slight objection to the Greeks.

Between the time when Rome possessed the land of Egypt and the invasion of the Arabs, Akhmîm appears to have been the home of a large Christian community, and to have attained to some ecclesiastical importance. It was here that, in the fifth century, the exiled Nestorius ended his days, and was laid to rest in the large necropolis, the excavations in which have yielded us such treasures of early Christian literature. In the winter of 1886-87, the Mission Archéologique du Caire, under the direction of M. Bouriart, made the cemetery of Akhmîm its happy hunting-ground, and their researches led to the discovery of a Greek version of the Book of Enoch, the heretical Apocalypse of Peter, and a fragment of the heretical Gospel of the same author. These three manuscripts were found stitched together so as to form a small book 6 inches by  $4\frac{1}{2}$ , and consisting of 33 pages of parchment. The cover is of the roughest description; it is of pasteboard, over which a bit of leather has been *dragged*. The handwriting of the Petrine fragments is in cursive Greek, and the style of it gives one the impression that the copyist was gifted with the "pen of a ready writer." In many respects the script is not unlike that in the Akhmîm mathematical papyrus, which, according to M. Baillet, dates from about the seventh century A.D. M. Bouriart, judging from the appearance of the grave, thinks that the interment took place not earlier than the eighth century nor later than the twelfth. Although discovered in 1886, it is only lately that scholars have had the opportunity of thoroughly studying this valuable manuscript. The fragment begins at the point of Christ's trial at which Pilate, having washed his hands—in contrast to the Jews, Herod and His judges, who did not choose to do so—arose; and Herod forthwith gives the order that the Lord should be taken. Joseph of Arimathæa, a friend of both Christ and Pilate, is present at the trial, and begs for permission to bury the body of the Lord after His crucifixion; but Pilate refers him to Herod, who replies: "Even if no one had asked, we should have buried him, inasmuch as the Sabbath draweth on." The people then seize hold of Christ

and push him roughly before them, finally seating Him on a judgment-seat and mocking Him. The crucifixion between two malefactors then takes place. "But he held his peace as having no pain." One of the malefactors upbraids the people, asking what wrong the Saviour of men had done to them; whereupon they become so angry that they command that "his legs be not broken, so that he might die in torment."

At noon darkness overspread Judæa, and the Jews are distressed, thinking that the sun had gone down: for it is forbidden for the sun to go down upon one that is put to death. They therefore offered to the Lord gall and vinegar in order to hasten the end. "And the Lord cried out, saying: 'My Power (*δύναμις*), my Power, thou hast forsaken me!' and when he had thus said he was taken up (*ἀνελήφθη*)." And the veil of the temple of Jerusalem was in that moment rent asunder. The nails were then withdrawn from the Lord's hands and His body laid upon the ground, and immediately the earth quaked, and the sun shone out again, and the Jews rejoiced because they could bury Him before sunset. And Joseph took the body, washed it, and laid it in linen, and buried it in his own tomb, called the "Garden of Joseph." But the joy is of short duration, for the Jews, elders and priests at once seem to realize what they have done, and exclaim: "Woe for our sins; for the judgment and the end of Jerusalem draw nigh." The disciples are then sought for as likely to set fire to the temple; they therefore hide themselves and fast and weep until the Sabbath. The elders, seized with fear, beseech of Pilate that soldiers might be given to guard the tomb, and Petronius, a centurion, is sent with a military guard. Seven seals are impressed upon the stone and a tent pitched close by. A multitude of people then come out from Jerusalem to look at the tomb, and during the night, as two soldiers are watching, a great voice from heaven is heard, a great light is seen, and two men enter the tomb, the door of which rolls back of itself. The soldiers rouse up the centurion and their comrades, and from the tomb are seen emerging three figures of supernatural height, the head of one of them being higher even than the heavens, and a voice is heard saying: "Hast thou preached to them that sleep?" and from the cross which followed came the answer "Yes." Again the heavens are opened, and a young man descends and enters the tomb. The military guard is so distressed and alarmed that, leaving the sepulchre to take care of itself, they hurry to Pilate, tell him what they have seen, and affirm that "Truly he was the Son of God," upon which Pilate satirically reminds them that he had nothing to do with the death of Christ, but that it was their own sentence. He, at their earnest request,

commands the watch to keep silence. On the dawn of the "Lord's Day" Mary Magdalene, who from fear of the Jews had not offered her tribute of respect to the dead Christ, took her friends and visited the sepulchre. On their arrival the tomb is open, and, stooping down and looking in, they see a young man seated in it, who inquires of them: "Why are ye come? Whom seek ye?" He then announces the Resurrection to them, saying: "He is risen and gone to the place from whence he was sent."

On the last day of unleavened bread, when many were returning to their homes, "We, the twelve disciples of the Lord, mourned and were grieved: and each one grieving for that which was come to pass departed to his home. But I, Simon Peter, and Andrew, my brother, took our nets and went away to the sea; and there was with us Levi, the son of Alphaeus, whom the Lord . . ." The sentence remains unfinished, and unless a happy discovery shall some day bring to light a complete copy of the Gospel of Peter, we must remain ignorant as to whether these sorrowing disciples ever met their risen Lord.

Such in brief is the outline of the fragment. In many respects it coincides with the canonical Gospels, and is evidently based upon them; while, on the other hand, there are many noticeable omissions as well as accretions in the Petrine version. Professor Swete considers that it "belongs to a class of writings which claimed to preserve the personal narrative of one of the Apostles"—of which writings there seem to have been many during the second century, emanating for the most part from the Gnostic sects.

The question which immediately presents itself to our minds is: How far did the early Church know of the Gospel of Peter, and did she recognise it in any way? The first to mention it is Serapion, Bishop of Antioch, whose episcopate began not earlier than A.D. 189 nor later than 192; the date of his death is quite uncertain, but he appears to have been still alive during the persecution of the Christians under Severus in A.D. 202-3. He addressed a pastoral letter upon the subject of St. Peter's Gospel to the Church which was at Rhossos. Apparently, when visiting that place, he found it disturbed by some strife which had been stirred up on the question of the use of that book in the public services. Borrowing a copy, and looking hastily through it, probably without suspecting any heresy lurking within, the good Bishop sanctioned its use. However, on his return to Antioch, detailed information concerning the contents of the book was sent to him, upon which he at once set off for Rhossos. It appeared that the Gospel had originated and was in use

among the sect of Christians known as the Docetæ,<sup>1</sup> whose leader was one Marcianus, and on careful perusal of its contents he found that the Gospel, though on the whole sound, contained certain additions which were not in accord with Catholic teaching. He then wrote a careful treatise upon the Gospel, a portion of which is quoted by Eusebius (H. E., vi. 12), and runs as follows:

“We, brethren, receive Peter and the other Apostles even as Christ; but the writings that go falsely by their names we in our experience reject, knowing that such things as these we never received. When I was with you I supposed you all to be attached to the right faith; so without going through the Gospel put forward under Peter’s name, I said: If this is all that causes you ill feeling, why, then, let it be read? But now that I have learnt from information given me that their mind was lurking in some hole of heresy, I will make a point of coming to you again: so, brethren, expect me speedily. Knowing then, brethren, from others who used this Gospel, of what kind of heresy was Marcianus—I mean from the successors of those who started it, whom we call Docetæ; for most of its ideas are of their school—from them, I say, I borrowed it, and was able to go through it and to find that most of it belonged to the right teaching of the Saviour, but some things were additions.” Now, Serapion was a distinguished Bishop of the early Church, a controversialist and a man of letters, yet it is quite clear that the Gospel of Peter was unknown to him until he visited Rhossos. It is also evident that the use of the book had caused dissensions; moreover, it was not without difficulty that he procured a copy for careful study, so that, at any rate, at the close of the second century the Gospel was but in little use, and had not even been heard of at Antioch, which lay at no great distance from Rhossos. Eusebius is the next Christian writer who alludes to this Gospel; he mentions six works attributed to the Apostle Peter: one Epistle which he considers genuine, a second Epistle doubtful as to its being canonical, a Preaching, an Apocalypse and a Book of Acts—all of which he gives as uncanonical—and a Gospel which is heretical (H. E., iii. 3). Origen makes a passing allusion to the Gospel of Peter as being the foundation upon which those who believed the brethren of the Lord to be the sons of Joseph by a former wife based their theory. Jerome mentions a Gospel in enumerating St. Peter’s writings, to which he adds another work, “A Book of Judgment.” Between the second and the fifth

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<sup>1</sup> From *δοκεῖν*, to seem. They held that Christ did not really suffer, but only appeared to do so.

centuries the Gospel of Peter is only mentioned by four writers, and in ancient lists of Biblical writings this book is conspicuously absent. All this points to the fact that the Gospel of Peter was neither widely known nor in common use in the early Christian Church. Rhossos, where it originated, lies on the coast near the Gulf of Iskanderûn, and was about thirty miles from Antioch, which was reached with difficulty on account of the configuration of the hills. At the time when Serapion visited it, it probably formed part of his diocese, though in A.D. 363 it formed the see of Cilicia Secunda, and its Bishop took part in the Council of Antioch. It was, in fact, an out-of-the-way place in the Diocese of Antioch.

In examining the Gospel of Peter from a critical point of view, the following facts call for attention :

It is, unlike the canonical Gospels, written throughout in the first person.

The writer appears to have had an intense hatred of the Jews, on whom the responsibility of the Crucifixion is thrown.

The fragment we now possess is evidently part of a whole Gospel, and not merely the story of the Crucifixion ; for there are allusions to the Twelve, the names and occupations of two of them are mentioned, and their connection with Galilee is also stated.

While the writer clearly insists upon our Lord's Divinity—He is throughout *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ* when alive, as He is *ὁ Κύριος* when dead—he at the same time gives utterance to distinctly Docetic opinions, with which he evidently was in sympathy. Is it possible that this Gospel was an attempt at a compromise with that sect ?

The basis of the fragment is, without doubt, the four Gospels, and, according to Professor Swete, "there is nothing in this portion of the Petrine Gospel which compels us to assume the use of historical sources other than the canonical Gospels."

Serapion says in his letter that, though the Gospel of Peter contained for the most part the right teaching of the Saviour, "some things were accretions." It was not so much that the real facts were suppressed and misrepresented as that statements were made which the Church, as the safeguard of canonical truth and doctrine, felt it her bounden duty to repudiate as unorthodox or unfounded.

Of these "accretions" the following are the most important :

- (a) Our Lord's immunity from pain during the Crucifixion.
- (b) His desertion by His "Power" when expiring.
- (c) His death being spoken of as an *ἀνάληψις* or "ascension," and not a "giving up of the ghost."
- (d) The sealing the sepulchre with seven seals.



(e) The supernatural height of the risen Christ and the attendant angels.

(f) The quasi-personification of the Cross.

(g) The intense hatred of the writer to the Jews, which is betrayed throughout the fragment.

The principal omissions in the Petrine fragment are :

(a) All the words from the Cross, except the cry: "My Power, my Power, why hast thou (or, thou hast) forsaken me."

(b) Christ's refusal to drink the gall and vinegar.

(c) The derision of priests and people during the Crucifixion, and the challenge to save Himself if He were the Son of God.

(d) The confession by the centurion, at the Cross, of Christ's Divinity.

(e) The piercing—after death—of the Lord's side.

(f) The absence of Nicodemus from the burial.

To sum up broadly the contents of this fragment of the Peter Gospel. It is about one-fourth longer than the average length of the canonical Gospels.

While evidently incorporating the substance of these Gospels, it gives many incidents which are not related in either of them, and also omits some of their statements.

On eight particular points the Petrine version is in accord with the Synoptists, and in twenty-two with one or more of the canonical Gospels.

There are only three statements made by all the Evangelists which are omitted in the fragment.

The coincidences throughout are numerous, and the use of the first, second, and the third Gospels is frequent, while the influence of the fourth, although traceable, is very faint.

There is not one single quotation from either the Old Testament or the Septuagint.

So far the Gospel of Peter is, on the whole, orthodox in tone; but in detail it has a distinctly Docetic tendency. Beyond the statement that Christ held His peace on the Cross "as feeling no pain," there is nothing in it at variance with the generally accepted doctrine of our Saviour's Passion; but at the same time it is clear that the tendency of the fragment would easily have led to heretical teaching. For this reason Serapion wisely forbade its use in the public services of the Church.

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