

PROFESSOR RAMSAY'S "CHURCH IN THE
ROMAN EMPIRE." ¹

THE writings of Prof. Ramsay have been the prominent and distinguishing feature in the contributions to early Church History of the last five or six years. They stand almost in a group to themselves. There is nothing quite like them either in English or German. In some way they may be said to continue a line of research which in this country is especially connected with the name of Bishop Lightfoot. And the nearest parallel to Part II. of the present book is the excellent monograph of K. J. Neumann, *Der Römische Staat und die allgemeine Kirche* (Leipzig, 1890). But every line that Prof. Ramsay has written bears an impress of its own, which marks it off even from work which covers similar ground. This is no doubt due largely to his strong individuality, but it is also due to the peculiar circumstances under which he approaches his subject.

He starts with the best classical and historical training of an university which has of late been developing its strength chiefly in the combination of classics with history. And it may be said in passing that if apology were needed for the direction of this development, Prof. Ramsay supplies it in ample measure. Nothing could be more admirable or more strictly scientific than the method he has pursued.

With this outfit he went out to Asia Minor. He spent

¹ *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170.* By W. M. Ramsay, M.A., etc. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

several seasons in investigating the antiquities upon the spot. The fruits of his labours may be seen in the *Journal of the Hellenic Society*, and in his volume on the *Historical Geography of Asia Minor*, which was noticed in a former number of THE EXPOSITOR.¹

In the course of his inquiries he found himself thrown back upon Christian documents. He became aware what an important part Christianity had played in the region of his explorations just at the time when that region enjoyed its greatest prosperity. He was in this way led to examine those documents in the light of his knowledge previously acquired. He soon found the interest of the subject; and he was also not long in finding that the special information and assistance which he was in a position to give them were highly valued by the more professed students of ecclesiastical history and theology. The volume now published is a collection of essays and lectures which bear directly upon the early history of Christianity in its contact with the Roman empire, and especially with that part of it which has to do with Asia Minor.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which deals with the journeys of St. Paul of which Asia Minor was the scene, while the second follows the fortunes of the infant Church, again chiefly in connexion with Asia Minor, to the middle of the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The volume concludes with two essays (one already familiar to readers of THE EXPOSITOR) on two outlying incidents, the story of Glycerius the Deacon, as gathered from the letters of St. Basil (A.D. 371-374), and another which throws light on the history of the Church of Khonai, the mediæval successor of Colossæ. Both these are skilfully and instructively handled.

But the book presents such an embarrassment of riches that in dealing with it I must perforce make a selection;

¹ 1891, i. p. 232 ff.

and I propose therefore to confine myself to three points, which are not more original than the rest—for the whole volume is full of freshness and originality—but which perhaps have the most important and novel bearing upon Christian history and literature. These points are, (1) the identification of the Galatian Churches with those founded on St. Paul's first missionary journey; (2) the course taken by the persecution of Christians in the first century; (3) the account which Prof. Ramsay gives of early Christian organization.

(1) Prof. Ramsay will, I think, command assent for all his close topographical treatment of the first journey of St. Paul as described in Acts xiii., xiv. So far as could be done by the study of books only, a good account is given of this journey in the English Lives of St. Paul. A merited tribute is paid in particular to the excellence of this part of the narrative of Conybeare and Howson. But Prof. Ramsay has the advantage of having been over the ground; and he is gifted, as few are gifted, with the power of connecting topography with history by close scientific reasoning. He has probably traced, as well as it is ever likely to be traced, the course followed by the Apostle and the localities which he visited.

But he steps on to more controverted ground when he propounds, with all the boldness and decision which characterize him, the view that the Churches founded on this journey, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, are none other than the Churches addressed in the Epistle to the Galatians. The view is of course not a new one. It has had one conspicuous advocate in recent times, M. Renan. But it had been discussed, and most of us thought sufficiently if not quite conclusively answered, by Bishop Lightfoot. It must, however, be confessed that even the great Bishop did not go into the question with so much thoroughness and precision as Prof. Ramsay. The first

point was the proof that these Churches were really included in the Roman province of Galatia. This had been recently questioned by Prof. Schürer, but is not likely to be questioned again. The next point was the proof that the Christians of this part of the province would be naturally addressed as "Galatians." I confess that I had been in the habit of thinking myself that the official designation was here out of place and would sound stilted. But Prof. Ramsay has shown that it would not be stilted but only courteous. His unrivalled knowledge of the history of the Roman political divisions, and of the attitude of the inhabitants towards those divisions, stands him in good stead. The third point is an exact analysis of the expression to which I suspect that most of us had attached a rather vague idea—"the Phrygian and Galatian country" in Acts xvi. 6. Lastly, it is, I think we must say, demonstrated that nothing could have taken St. Paul into *North* Galatia, that the roads which passed through that district led nowhere, at least to no place which St. Paul is at all likely to have visited.

There remain only two substantial arguments on the other side, (i.) that a different nomenclature is adopted in Acts ii. 9, which follows popular and not official usage (contrast 1 Pet. i. 1); and (ii.) that if St. Paul visited the Churches of South Galatia on his way to Ephesus on his third journey, he would naturally pass through Colossæ, a Church which according to Colossians ii. 1 he had never seen.

But (i.) it is not only possible but probable that Acts ii. 9 is derived from a wholly different document, the language of which has been preserved. And (ii.) although the main road from the Pisidian Antioch to Ephesus no doubt did pass through Colossæ, there was another route, branching off near Metropolis in Southern Phrygia, which for reasons unknown to us St. Paul might have taken.

On the whole it seems to me that Prof. Ramsay has made out a strong case, in which, so far as I am justified in forming an opinion, I am disposed to agree with him. The result would be a decided simplification of the history as derived conjointly from the Acts and the Epistles. We should thus know something of the antecedents of the Galatian Churches, which on the other view were almost entirely dark to us. And the important Churches of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, on or near one of the great thoroughfares, would not be brought upon the stage only to be withdrawn from it again. The narrative of the Acts assumes on this hypothesis a degree of consistency and accuracy which could not otherwise be claimed for it. Another result would be that the date of the Epistle to the Galatians might be placed earlier in the scheme of St. Paul's epistles if it were desired to do so. The Epistle implies at least two previous visits, which might have been on the first and second journeys, and not on the second and third. The resemblance between Galatians and Romans is of course an argument for bringing the two Epistles near together. But this is not decisive, because Philippians also shows a marked resemblance to Romans, where the interval cannot well be less than three years. I mention this point because there are some indications that the question of the date of the Epistle to the Galatians may be raised again before long.

I have not space to do more than note the fact that Prof. Ramsay has paid special attention to the text of *Codex Bezae* in the middle chapters of the Acts. He shows that the author of some of its most characteristic readings had a special acquaintance with Asia Minor, and that he worked between the years 138-161 A.D. This is probable in itself, and I think is well made out.

There is also a little passage of arms between Prof. Ramsay and Canon Hicks in regard to the origin of the

tumult at Ephesus, with which readers of *THE EXPOSITOR* are familiar.¹ While fully acknowledging the interest and acuteness of Canon Hicks' suggestion, which no one but he could have made, I yet incline to give my vote against him.

(2) New and important light is thrown on the persecution of Christians in the first century. Here our author starts from a searching examination of the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan in reference to the treatment of the Bithynian Christians in 112 A.D. The principal and certain inference from this is that the punishment of Christians was not a new thing, but that it was already a settled principle of the imperial policy; further, that Christians were treated simply as outlaws, and that they were liable to be punished "for the Name," *i.e.* for the mere fact of being Christians, apart from any definite crime which might be charged against them. The great problem in the early history is, When did this policy begin? And in particular, When did the name alone begin to be treated as criminal?

The first question Prof. Ramsay naturally answers by pointing to the great outbreak of persecution under Nero 64 A.D. But the second question is really the more critical. And here Prof. Ramsay believes that the special state of things which is found existing under Trajan did not begin with Nero but under the Flavian dynasty which followed; that it was initiated by Vespasian after some years of his reign had elapsed and developed by Titus and Domitian, especially by the latter, and that it assumed the dimensions of a regular persecution under that emperor.

It is allowed that from the time of Nero's first action onwards persecution never wholly ceased. The persecution of Nero, begun for the sake of diverting popular attention, was continued as a permanent police measure under the

¹ See *EXPOSITOR*, 1890, i. p. 401 ff.; ii. p. 1 ff., 144 ff.

form of a general prosecution of Christians as a sect dangerous to the public safety (p. 241). The difference is that whereas under Nero Christians were punished for definite alleged crimes, under the Flavii they were proscribed more systematically; not only were they punished for the mere fact of being Christians, but they were "sought out"; the police had standing instructions to make search for them. This continued the whole time from Nero onwards. There would be degrees of severity and activity in the persecution of Christians just as there would be in the pursuit of brigands. Some governors were indolent; others were merciful and were proud of bringing back the axes of their lictors with no stains of blood upon them. But the first distinct and deliberate mitigation of the severity of the law was when Trajan's rescript ordered that efforts were no longer to be made "to seek out" the Christians. The penalty of death remained against those who were clearly proved to be Christians; but so long as they were quiet and attention was not called to them, they might be let alone. This policy prevailed under Hadrian and the Antonines; indeed it was still more strongly emphasized by Hadrian, who discouraged accusations, and, if the accusation failed, turned the penalties against the accuser.

Nothing could be more admirable than the exact and closely reasoned way in which all this is worked out by Prof. Ramsay. There is however one point—and that in some respects the crucial point of all—on which I am not yet fully convinced; and on this it will perhaps be well for me to state my objections. If the policy of punishing Christians for the Name alone did not begin under the Flavii, the alternative is that it began in the later years of Nero himself. And I confess that, to me, on the evidence before me, this appears the more probable. It agrees better with the evidence of Suetonius. It is not inconsistent with

the evidence of Tacitus. It also agrees better with the Christian tradition, which accumulates its memories of persecution on the heads of Nero and Domitian, and is quite silent about Domitian's father and brother. Lastly, it appears that the developed policy might grow naturally and easily out of the original persecution under Nero without needing any further impulse, which is also insufficiently attested. Let me say a word on each of these points.

(i.) There are two other witnesses to the action taken against Christians besides Tacitus. The first is Sulpicius Severus, who, though too late to be of much value as a direct authority, is proved to have had Tacitus before him, and would have access to parts of the work of Tacitus which are no longer extant. Sulpicius describes (after Tacitus) the Neronian persecution, and then adds: "This was the beginning of severe measures against the Christians. Afterwards the religion was forbidden by formal laws, and the profession of Christianity was made illegal by published edicts.¹ The language is probably in any case exaggerated, but the main question is, What is meant by "afterwards"? Prof. Ramsay thinks it means "under subsequent emperors." Possibly, but by no means certainly. Rather the direct evidence of the other witness, Suetonius, seems to point to Nero himself.

Suetonius notes among a number of police regulations issued during the reign of Nero, that "the Christians were visited with punishment—a class of persons addicted to a novel and pernicious superstition."² The reference is not to a single outbreak of violence but to deliberate measures of repression. Prof. Ramsay argues excellently and con-

¹ *Chron.* ii. 29: *Hoc initio in Christianos sæviri cœptum, post etiam datis legibus religio vetabatur, palamque edictis propositis Christianum esse non licebat.*

² *Nero* 16: *Afflicti suppliciiis Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novæ ac maleficæ.*

clusively that these measures were intended to be permanent, and that they were part of a settled policy. Indeed from this time he dates the continued persecution of Christians.

But if so, does it not follow from the language of Suetonius that Christians were punished *as such*? Their crime was that they were Christians—members of "a new and noxious sect." If they had been punished for anything else, surely the ordinary regulations would have sufficed. If they were punished not for the Name but for "crimes attaching to the name," there would be nothing to distinguish them from ordinary wrongdoers. There would have been no need to give special instructions about them. The language of Suetonius implies the creation of a new offence.

(ii.) But, it is argued, Tacitus lays stress upon the *flagitia*. The first victims no doubt suffered on the specific charge of incendiarism. But the persecution went on. Others were implicated and charged, no longer with incendiarism, but with hatred of the human race.¹

I submit that we see here the origin of the name of Christian being regarded as penal. Incendiarism is a definite charge, but hatred of the human race is not. No doubt it included a number of definite acts. I accept Prof. Ramsay's analysis of the meaning of the phrase, and take it as referring especially to the interference of Christianity with family life—with the relations of husband and wife, parent and child. Christianity forbade many things which Paganism permitted, and so was constantly putting barriers and obstacles in the way. How many of the Acts of Martyrs turn upon the jealousy and rage of disappointed

¹ *Annals* xv. 44: *Igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens, haud perinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis conjuncti sunt.* I believe that Prof. Ramsay is right in keeping *conjuncti* with *Qd. Med.*; *convicti* of course lay near at hand, but does not seem necessary.

suitors! It is easy to understand how popular feeling would be aroused and Christianity branded as anti-social.

But in all this there would be no definite, tangible breach of the law, nothing that in itself would involve the extreme penalty. Of course there were the scandals, *flagitia*, of which Christians were accused. But that which really told would be rather a number of small acts, not in themselves criminal, which were conveniently summed up under such a description as "hatred of the human race." Surely this is only one degree removed from making the Christian name itself penal.

(iii.) Another fact which points in the same direction is that from the first, as Prof. Ramsay states, Christians were "sought out." Crimes did not need seeking out—they obtruded themselves upon the public eye. To deal with them was part of the regular business of the police. But it did need some search to find out who were Christians and who were not. Prof. Ramsay himself explains in this way the confessions to which Tacitus alludes. The crime to which the victims confessed was not that of causing the fire, but that of being Christians. We are certainly not to believe that every one of those who suffered had some actual *flagitium* brought home to him. His Christianity itself raised a suspicion of *flagitia*. And thus it is difficult to see how a persecution like Nero's could stop short of punishing the mere Christian profession. There can be little doubt that it did so in fact; and the issuing of express regulations on the subject gave a colour of legality to that which would otherwise have looked like wanton cruelty and oppression.

(iv.) All this falls in well with the later Christian tradition which singled out Nero as the typical persecutor, and named no one else between him and Domitian. If Vespasian and Titus had been the first to make Christianity really penal, it is hard to see how they could have been

passed over. No doubt Nero's regulations continued in force, and it is very probable that Christians continued to suffer under them, but not to such an extent as to attract special notice.

I have done my best to argue this question without introducing Christian documents. It is best that it should be so argued, and if possible settled independently of them. At the same time I am aware that the documents themselves are not unaffected by the result. Those most involved are the First Epistle of St. Peter and the Apocalypse.

Prof. Ramsay has an original view about the First Epistle of St. Peter. He thinks that in any case it was written about the year 80 A.D., and he gives us our choice of supposing that, if it is genuine, St. Peter outlived the destruction of Jerusalem; or that if, as is commonly assumed, he died before that event, the Epistle is not genuine.

The reason for fixing upon the date is that the Name is just beginning to be punishable. There is some survival of the old state of things, in which definite allegations were made, but, at the same time, Christians were liable to suffer simply as Christians (1 Pet. iv. 15, 16). How far this holds good will depend upon the answer which is given to our previous argument. If that is successful, I do not see any sufficient reason why the Epistle should not have been written in the year 66 quite as well as in the year 80.

Prof. Ramsay makes use of a hint thrown out in conversation by Dr. Hort. It is true that there is no mention of the year of St. Peter's death. Still I confess that I do not think it easy to prolong his life beyond the year 70. Several writers, Clement of Rome, Dionysius of Corinth, and Irenæus, couple together St. Peter and St. Paul in a way which I think is most natural, if they met their end about the same time. And Irenæus says expressly that St. Mark did not write his Gospel until after the decease (*ἐξόδου*) of

both Apostles.¹ It is true that Clement of Alexandria gives a slightly different version, and makes the Gospel written during the lifetime of St. Peter.² But Irenæus is slightly the older of the two, and had a closer connexion with the Church of Rome, so that we should expect him to have the more accurate knowledge of its traditions. Now, there are many reasons for thinking that the mass of the Second Gospel was already written at the time of the fall of Jerusalem. Indirectly, therefore, I think that we have some evidence—not convincing evidence, but evidence of a certain weight, which I should not like to throw over lightly—for placing the death of St. Peter before that event.

The case of the Apocalypse is more doubtful. I admit that the arguments for dating this under Domitian are strong. The external evidence in particular is both good and explicit. The stress which is laid on the worship of the emperor (Rev. xiii. 14, xiv. 9, xv. 2, xvi. 2, etc.) also looks rather more like the reign of Domitian than that of Nero or Galba.³ And there are other reasons.

And yet twenty years ago the great majority of the more trustworthy scholars were in favour of placing it under Galba in the year 69 A.D. There is still, I cannot help thinking, a great deal to be said in favour of that view. But I am in doubt myself, and I am ready to be convinced. Of course, if Prof. Ramsay is right, the earlier date must be abandoned. But I would rather see that question argued out on its own merits first.

(3) If the deliberate attempts to suppress Christianity began under emperors like Vespasian and Titus, we may be pretty sure that they had a statesmanlike motive. And Prof. Ramsay finds that motive in the consciousness on the

¹ *Adv. Hær.*, iii. 1, 1.

² *Ap. Eus., H. E.*, ii. 15.

³ Yet the worship of the emperor was always going on, and was at its worst in the province of Asia. We can easily imagine how a Jew fresh from Palestine, where it was kept out of sight as much as possible, would be shocked at it.

part of the government of the formidable strength of the Christian organization.

I cannot help thinking that Prof. Ramsay somewhat exaggerates, or at least antedates, this consciousness. He dismisses rather severely an objection of Aubé's, "who thinks it inconceivable that Nero should have already begun to suspect that the growth of the organized Christian religion might prove dangerous to the Empire" (p. 358). I am afraid that I should have to associate myself with this scepticism, which Prof. Ramsay thinks unreasonable. It is true that he draws a graphic and excellent picture of the amount of intercommunication between the Churches (p. 365 f.). But intercommunication, apart from organization, would not be thought a dangerous feature. And on Professor Ramsay's own showing, at this earlier date the organization must have been still very immature.

I can accept the sketch which is given on p. 363 of the organization as it existed about the year 170 A.D., provided that we remember that it was a state of things not long established, but only just being reached. We must remember in particular that councils or synods were only just beginning to be held in connexion with the measures taken against Montanism, and that they were at first only local meetings of a few neighbouring bishops. I can perfectly understand that the Church might be thought to be a dangerous organization by the time of Maximinus Thrax (235 A.D.); but I doubt if it was so even in the time of Trajan. If it had been, surely that vigorous emperor would have pursued a different policy. Instead of practically letting Christianity alone, he would have kept at least a vigilant watch upon it. And what is true of Trajan would be true *a fortiori* of Vespasian. Is it not enough that Christianity should be regarded as noxious, without supposing that it was also regarded as dangerous?

But Prof. Ramsay sees rightly that the centre of the

Church organization was the bishops. It was they who really bound together the federated societies. And yet he himself thinks that by the time of Ignatius the episcopal office was but very partially developed.

He has a new and interesting, but I cannot think wholly tenable, view of the origin of the Episcopate. His idea is that the *episcopos* did not originally hold any permanent office, but that the name was given to any presbyter appointed to perform a special duty. The most important of these special duties was that of communicating with other Churches; so that we should have a good example of the *episcopos* in Clement of Rome penning his letter in the name of the Roman Church to the Church at Corinth, or when Hermas hands over his "booklet" to Clement for transmission to foreign Churches.

My difficulty in regard to this view is threefold. (i.) I do not think that there is any evidence of the use of the term *episcopos* in connexion with the discharge of these special and temporary duties. From the time of Ignatius onwards there are many examples of the bishop corresponding with other Churches; but by this time he was the representative of the Church, and as such would naturally be its spokesman. It is less clear that he wrote in his special capacity as bishop. The two letters, from the Church of Smyrna with an account of the death of Polycarp, and from the Churches of Vienne and Lyons with details of the persecution of 177 A.D., were both written, so far as appears, without the intervention of a bishop. And in Cyprian's correspondence there are a number of letters addressed to and from "presbyters and deacons," "confessors and martyrs," etc. We know too that Novatian took a leading part in the correspondence of the Church of Rome before his election as bishop. Even in the case of Clement there is nothing to connect his writing of letters with the duties of a bishop beyond the fact that he is called "bishop" in the later lists of the Roman succession.

(ii.) The evidence for the existence of *episcopoi* as definite and permanent officers of the local Church, I should have thought, went back to the Epistle to the Philippians and the *Didache*. St. Paul sends greeting to "all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the *episcopoi* and *diaconoi*" (Phil. i. 1). Can we think that he means by this anything short of the holders of permanent office? The holders of a merely temporary commission, created for the occasion and lapsing with it, would hardly have been singled out in this way. Again, the *Didache* (xv. 1, 2) speaks of the election of bishops and deacons, and compares them with prophets and teachers, in terms which seem to imply permanence.

(iii.) The great problem in regard to the *Episcopate* is how it came to be *monarchical*. How did the single *episcopos* come to take the place of the plurality of *episcopoi*? Prof. Ramsay's theory would only accentuate this difficulty, and would do nothing to remove it. If at first for every separate duty there was some one separately deputed, we are as far removed as possible from the concentration of a variety of functions in a single individual.

I have stated my difficulties quite frankly, with no wish to maintain them obstinately, or to put them forward as if they were in any respect final, but only with a view to contribute towards that thorough discussion and testing of his positions which I know that Prof. Ramsay himself would desire.

I lay down his book with warm and sincere admiration. He has succeeded in investing a number of critical discussions with extraordinary vividness and reality. He has done so because he writes always "with his eye upon the object," and that an object seen in the light of knowledge which in its own special sphere (the geography of Asia Minor and Roman administration) is unrivalled.

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