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*IS SECOND PETER A GENUINE EPISTLE TO
THE CHURCHES OF SAMARIA?*

III.

DESTINATION OF THE EPISTLE.

GNOSTICISM has been a name to conjure with. But to-day the historian must define his term, he must distinguish its multiform varieties, and sift out the original ingredients. System and principle underlay its diverse shapes. It was an attempt to solve the world-riddle, a philosophy of existence. Not every witch's caldron of superstitions was worthy to be labelled gnostic. As it is seen in the great systems of the second century Gnosticism is a recombination of elements from different religious structures, Oriental, Hellenistic and Jewish, tendencies to a Jewish gnosis running back to pre-Christian times. There were Jewish radicals, perhaps chiefly Hellenists, who allegorized away the Law and refused to be regulated by its morals. They denied the resurrection of the body, and dealt much in theories of angels and mediating powers.

Magic was another important ingredient in some types of Gnosticism. But magic itself was a syncretism with at least some rudimentary speculation conformed to its practice. Among the Jews it often went hand in hand with a radical attitude to the Law, among the Samaritans with superadded ethnic extravagances. Demonology, the informing spirit of magic, had at the opening of our era developed to enormous proportions throughout the Orient, fascinating even distinguished rabbis contemporary with the Apostles, and that too in spite of the fact that in the Old Testament sorcery is an object of horror to the true prophet. Magic was one of the arts of the false prophets who plied it as an exceptional source of revenue. Down through the history of Israel and afterwards of the Church there is heard every-

where the evil echo of illicit commerce with the world of spirits. The demons were supposed to be the offspring of the fallen angels and to have led men into vices of every sort. They swarmed in this world working mischief, bodily and spiritual; against which numerous words and devices were deemed effective by the ordinary timorous Jew, the most potent being the unutterable name of God.*

Not the least merciful portion of the ministry of Jesus was His wonderful incursion into the kingdom of evil spirits. By driving out demons He proved Himself to be the One who could bind the strong man, and rid the house which he had usurped of him (Matt. xii. 24-32). On the threshold of the apostolic age this hideous spirit of evil again presents itself to the young Church as its first missionaries go forth. From Acts it is not difficult to trace its shape, and the letters of the Apostles occasionally reveal the apprehension caused to the believing heart by its power. Simon, Elymas and the Jewish exorcists of Ephesus (Acts viii., xiii., xix.), amazing the common people by their enchantments, have large success with them, and are rated at their own valuation by the cultured and wealthy classes. But they are full of guile and reckless mischief, they are enemies of all righteousness, sons of the devil, doomed to perish. They make vast claims and have a most elaborate system of charms with which to keep the evil spirits in their control. In Ephesus especially their books—the *Ephesia Grammata* filled with barbaric words and polysyllabic names—were of extreme value. Recently discovered papyri from Egypt contain endless varieties of the name Yahweh (*ιαβέ*) and other meaningless symbols employed by the Samaritans to bring the demon under their influence. Greed for money and influence is perhaps the most constant feature of these sorcerers.

There was never any compromise with the system or its leaders by a Peter or a Paul. For both the terrible power

of the spirit of evil and the awful cost of their Lord's victory were too real to admit of trifling with what was chiefly imposture. Though in the Gospels it is physical rather than moral injury that is traced to the demon, the Apostles as well as their Master recognize the immense control of the unseen world of evil upon the present life. In Ephesians vi. 10 ff. the Christian life is pictured as a terrific struggle "against world-rulers of this darkness, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places," and in Romans viii. 38 the love of God is said to be the one protection against the angelic powers. This awe of the mysterious realm of evil dominates Christian thought even in the sub-apostolic age, when Justin Martyr traces sensual sin to demonic influence.

Widespread as was the practice of magic it had from early days been connected with Egypt. The "magicians of Egypt" (Exod. vii. 11) were identified in Jewish tradition with Jannes and Jambres (2 Tim. iii. 8), sons of Balaam, the reputed father of sorcery. Samaritans, many of whom were living in the Fayum at the opening of our era, became in time unholy partners with the Egyptians in this traffic. The geographical situation of Samaria had affected its history from the beginning. Lying open on all sides it welcomed foreigners and foreign influences, and at the time of Alexander the Great capitulated to Greek civilization, which spread rapidly by a ready access on the West from the sea, and on the East through the Decapolis. A country rich and fair, it suffered deterioration from its opulence, supporting a population whose certain decay followed on the indiscriminate hospitality with which it received Pagan influences, Hellenism, or any strange teaching or superstition from Asia Minor, Egypt, or the further Orient. The leading city of the district was Samaria, originally hellenized by Alexander, and retaining a strong Greek element down till the time of Herod the Great, who

enlarged it in honour of Augustus, called it Sebasté, and gave a vast impetus to Greek culture and religion.

The account of the conversion of Samaria is given in Acts viii. 4-25, ix. 31. Samaria was only semi-pagan, and was well fitted to be the halfway house for the Gospel as it went to the nations of the world. Our Lord Himself may have laid the foundations of a Christian Church at Shechem, for the welcome He received was generous, and the faith of those who believed on Him was the purest He had yet seen (John iv. 39-42). Samaria's inglorious record was sustained by Simon Magus with his assumption of divine power and the practice of magic. He may well have been the Balaam of the Samaritans as that character is represented by tradition. There is little reason for doubting that Simon reverted to his type, and it is equally probable that a number of those who had been attracted by the Apostles' manifestations of power, rather than by the moral excellence of their teaching, shortly succumbed to the baleful influences that pervaded their society. As time went on Samaria's rank, luxurious, half-heathen life proved to be a breeding ground for pestilential heresies in the early Church. On its surface were thrown up false messiahs, one Dositheus as early as the beginning of our era, the spiritual father of notorious successors—Simon (probably the Simon Magus of Acts), Menander, Cleobius, the first of whom drew the deepest scar across the Church's life. By the time of the outbreak of the Jewish war in 66 A.D. the population of Samaria had become chiefly heathen through the introduction of soldiers under the government of the procurators.

Thus the seed of the word often fell among thorns which soon sprang up and threatened to choke it. But these thorns were of different species; and the false growth against which the Gospel had to make headway in the Churches to which 2 Peter was written is of its own kind

and almost unique in the New Testament, though there are other specimens of the same family.

A still active prophecy is employed for the propagation of error (ii. 1). The libertines, who abused the privilege of "teaching," had been Christians; indeed, they still claimed the name, or at least the right of sharing in the sacred feasts of the Church (ii. 13, 14, 21). They made great boast of freedom, and set forth self-chosen opinions¹ in opposition to Christian truth, which is a categorical imperative from the Lord who bought them (ii. 1, 2, 21). Their teaching was primarily practical not speculative immorality. Their characteristic vice was that of the fallen angels, the antediluvian world and the cities of the plain, and was indulged with the utmost shamelessness. Greed is equally characteristic of their selfishness. Men count with them for nothing; for lust or for money they will traffic in their souls (ii. 3, 13-15).

If these false teachers were wandering or local "goetae," who had once been Christians, or who had assumed the Christian name in order to push their avaricious commerce in lust among the Churches of Samaria, and if this letter was a circular epistle meant to forestall their work, we have a plausible situation.

They may have had a few speculative tenets, but certainly the day had not yet come for the imaginative structures of later Gnosticism. Several elements of a system may however be detected—they do not fear to blaspheme glories (ii. 10); they follow in the way of Balaam (ii. 15); they deny the Parousia (iii. 4); they undervalue prophecy (i. 17-21, iii. 2, 4); and distort Christian writings (iii. 16).

Like Elymas they are a parallel phenomenon to the false

¹ The common opinion that *αἵρεσις ἀπωλείας* is to be taken in the sense of "heresies," as used in the 2nd century, is unfounded, for (1) there is only one type of "heresy" in this Epistle; (2) the qualifying *ἀπωλείας* distinguishes it from the absolute singular which in the 2nd century had come to be a deadly sin (Ign. Eph. 6², Trall. 6¹).

prophets of the Old Testament, who were directed by a spirit of lying, and often had recourse to the evil arts of Egypt (Isa. viii. 19, xix. 3; Acts xiii. 6; 2 Pet. ii. 1, 15). Balaam had become the conventional type of those who employ divine gifts to lead others into licentiousness and idolatry for the sake of gain. He was the arch-magician, the father of sorcerers. Now, the description "they utter swelling words of vanity" (ii. 18) would exactly suit the extravagant claims put forward, for example, by Simon Magus, when he gave out that he was "the Power of God which is called great" (Acts viii. 10; cf. 2 Pet. i. 16), or the bombastic spells of exorcists—blasphemous speech bordering on idolatry, which, as in the case of false prophecy in the Old Testament, is vain because it has not the true God as its object (cf. LXX. Ezek. xiii. 6, 9, 19; Dan. xi. 36 Th.). In their audacity these false teachers claim to be superior to the whole hierarchy of evil dignities, which perhaps, like the Sadducees, with whom the Samaritans had points of contact, they ignored, or claimed to hold in check by their incantations. They probably justified their immoral conduct by tracing evil to these spirits, for whom they would show their contempt by openly indulging their passions (ii. 10–12). The belief was persistent that the wickedness of the earth was to be traced to fallen angels (Enoch vi.–viii.; *Iren., Adv. Hær.* i. 31, 2; *Clem. Recog.* ii. 13); and the supposition that these libertines were using magic to help out their utter disregard of morality and of the unseen spiritual hierarchy, is rendered probable by the fact that the author uses the punishment of the fallen angels, who introduced sorcery and lust into the world, as his first warning against the false teachers. As the Jewish false prophet of Acts xiii. 10 was full of guile and reckless mischief, and perverted the right ways of the Lord, so do these men practise deceit and make havoc of their associates, having left the right way (ii. 3, 13, 15). Their doom, pronounced of old on such evil, is

certain. They are children of a curse, sons of the devil (ii. 3, 14; Deut. xviii. 9-12; Acts viii. 20, xiii. 10). They endanger young converts who had found that Christ was really a power for godliness in their lives. The name of Jesus is no exorcist's charm. Where He was preached He was a living power—not through vain repetition of His name, but by a real knowledge of what He is (ii. 21)—against the spirit of evil. He is the stronger man who had cast out the demon of lust and had brought life and godliness (i. 3, 16, ii. 20, 21). These false teachers boast of their freedom indeed; but, whatever outward success they may have in exorcism, their high-sounding words are impotent against the grip of the strong man who holds them slaves in pollution (ii. 18, 19). All this was the most direct denial of the Christ who has purchased the Christian, for it was to say that His redemptive life and death were unnecessary (ii. 1).

Another element in this error was the denial of the Parousia. This doctrine had been one of the two pillars of apostolic teaching. Christ was a present power for life and godliness: He will come again to judge the quick and the dead (i. 16). Like the Greeks of Asia Minor, and probably the Hellenistic Jews, these libertines seem to have denied a bodily resurrection (1 Cor. xv. 12; 2 Tim. ii. 18) on the ground that emancipation from the body rather than its resurrection was the hope of the future. But, further, Samaritans and Sadducees always had more or less intercourse with one another. The former borrowed from the Sadducees the denial of the resurrection.¹ If there is no resurrection of the body there can be no Parousia and no judgment for sins committed in the body. Possibly they held that matter is eternal, for the writer appeals to Scripture to prove that by the word of God the world was created and is sustained (iii. 5).

¹ See Nutt's *Sketch of Samaritan Literature*.

They also made light of Scripture prophecy (i. 17-21, iii. 4), though there is not a sign of the later Gnostic tenet that the Old Testament was the product of the world-God. If, as may have been the case, the old Samaritan prejudice against prophecy was still leavening even the Christian communities, we get a reasonable explanation of the apparent disregard for the promises of God. Like some of their contemporaries these errorists, further, played fast and loose with Christian writings (iii. 16; 2 Thess. ii. 2; Rev. xxii. 18-19).

There are no personal greetings in 2 Peter; so it may have been a circular letter to the Church throughout Samaria, to whose composite population, Pagan, Greek, and old-stock Samaritan, the descriptions of i. 1, ii. 1, 18 would be appropriate. Their Apostles, who preached the Gospel to them (i. 16, iii. 2), were Peter and John; they made known the power and Parousia of a living Saviour, in contrast with the "cunningly devised fables" and "feigned words" of false messiahs like Simon. The invasion of the false teachers is not yet fully come: they are partly present, partly imminent. Peter probably recognized the beginnings of a revival of the influence of the magicians and false prophets which had received a set-back in the Christianization of the cities of Samaria. The heresy may have retired to more pagan sections where it lurked for a while, scotched not killed. It was merely a question of time when it would present itself anew in Christian centres with all its venom. Forerunners are already hard at the work of perversion, and are tempting to apostasy some of those baptized perhaps by Philip, but who had never forgotten the fascination of their earlier superstition; and are making havoc of more recent neophytes impatient of the stringency of Christian morals in a semi-pagan environment (ii. 18).

Nor is it difficult to discover conditions for the letter of

Paul (iii. 15). We know that he visited Caesarea more than once, and was confined there for two years before he went to Rome, though not so strictly but that he might have communicated through visitors or by letter with his Churches. Twenty-five miles to the west of Samaria lay Caesarea, the seaport of the whole region. It was the gateway to the Gentile world and was a strategical point for Peter, when at the bidding of God he inaugurated a new era by bringing the Gospel to Cornelius, not long after a kindred work had been accomplished in Samaria. Paul must have always had a deep interest in the first Churches which were not strictly Jewish, and may have written them a letter from Caesarea, or may possibly have sent an epistle to Caesarea and these hellenized cities of Samaria which had intimate mutual relations.

Symeon (Simon) Peter addresses the readers (i. 1). The time to fold up his tent for his last journey draws nigh (i. 14), though he has hope of leaving them some further memorial of the Gospel (i. 15). All this is perhaps an indication that the letter was written shortly before he left Antioch for Rome. When he sends our first Epistle to the Churches of Asia Minor his more distinctively Palestinian name has been shortened to Peter. A probable date for 2 Peter would be about 60 A.D., when the synoptic groundwork was taking its form.¹

The home of magic, of false messiahs and of Sadducean sensuality, its doors open on the West to Egyptian superstition, its eastern border studded by Greek cities of the Decapolis, where theosophy and lust in the service of religion were rampant, the province of Samaria would supply just the material for the evil practices and theories presupposed by this Epistle.

The two types of error in the New Testament most germane to the teaching just outlined are found in 1 Corinthians

¹ Compare especially the eschatology of the Synoptic Gospels.

and in the Revelation. Indeed, Professors Bigg and Zahn are inclined to identify these manifestations with that of 2 Peter. Professor Ramsay holds that the description in the second chapter of our Epistle is drawn from the same class of persons as is alluded to in the messages to Pergamus and Thyatira (Rev. ii.), and whose action in Corinth prompted Paul's references in 1 Corinthians viii. 10, xi. 22. "The teaching of Balaam" has become by the time of the Apocalypse (ii. 14) a stereotyped formula. Professor Ramsay is also of the opinion that on the whole the time of Revelation is later than that of 2 Peter (EXPOSITOR, Feb., 1901). But it seems to me that 1 Corinthians and Revelation present forms of error with much greater mutual kinship than exists between either and that of 2 Peter. In 2 Peter the feasts are Christian love-feasts (though the name is probably not yet used), not in any way connected with heathen temples and their gross fornication; nor is there any allusion to the demonic influences of idolatry, nor to fellowship in pagan clubs.

A comparison with Colossians, and especially with the Pastorals, reveals some close resemblances to our Epistle. But the differences are equally patent. Their false teaching is a parasite from the Jewish law that has fastened on Christianity. The trivial casuistry of the Haggada and the Halacha engaged these errorists, who also practised—at least some of them—an asceticism which may be traced to a Jewish origin (Hort). The Colossians, in addition, instead of despising angels gave them undue reverence.

Thus, though no other New Testament writing reflects precisely the error of 2 Peter and Jude, the germs of which it was composed were found throughout the Orient at the beginning of our era, and in various sections of the Christian Church in the Apostolic Age, having been borne on every wind from Egypt, Samaria, Syria or Asia Minor, in which great beds of weed had run to head.

There are insuperable difficulties against placing this Epistle in the second century:—(1) The absence of any developed theosophical system such as that of Carpocrates with aeons, transmigrations, and the distinction between the Supreme and the Creator God. The other antinomian heresies described by Irenaeus do not afford any closer analogy. (2) Not only is there no suggestion of Chiliasm in iii. 8, which contains a quotation employed by Barnabas, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus in its support, but at the end of the third century Methodius of Olympus cites 2 Peter as an apostolic authority against the Chiliastic interpretation of the Johannine Apocalypse. Yet Chiliasm was the orthodox belief in the second century in circles in which Alexandrian thought is as rare as it is in 2 Peter. Nor is there a hint of Antichrist commonly associated with Chiliasm, as may be seen from the *Ascensio Isaiæ* as well as the Apocalypse of John. (3) Silence regarding ecclesiastical organization, the fixed authority of “the Twelve,” or the Church. By contrast we may cite the *Didaché* and the *Ascensio Isaiæ*. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not referred to in any of the distinctive terms applied to them in the second century.

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