

*HISTORICAL COMMENTARY ON THE FIRST  
EPISTLE TO TIMOTHY.*

**XIX. THE TIME OF AND REASON FOR THE EPISTLE**  
(iii. 14-16).

THE Epistle was written at a time when Paul was at a distance from Ephesus; and, though hopeful of soon returning thither, he was quite well aware that it might be a long time before circumstances permitted him to pay a visit to that city.

It has been already pointed out in Section V.<sup>1</sup> that Paul could not have written this sentence while he had in mind the great scheme (expressed in Acts xix. 21, xx. 25, etc., and in Romans generally, especially xv. 24-26) for leaving the Eastern congregations to manage their own life, with the help of letters from himself and of his subordinates, and devoting himself to the establishment of the new Faith in Rome and the Western Provinces. It must therefore have been written either before the scheme was formed in his mind, or after it was abandoned as impracticable and unsuitable. The visit which is meant in iii. 14 is not a mere passing or farewell call: it is one intended for definite congregational work, which (if he could have counted on it with certainty) would have rendered unnecessary the careful instructions about church organization given in chapter ii.

Such a visit could not have been in Paul's thoughts at any time between Acts xx. 25 and the end of the book. It is clear that his whole mind was concentrated during that period on the Roman work (Acts xxiii. 11, xxvii. 24).<sup>2</sup> Nor could any further serious and continued work

<sup>1</sup> EXPOSITOR, July 1909, pp. 3 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Visions like those described in the two passages quoted may be taken generally (not always) as the expression and confirmation of thoughts that were floating in the mind of the seer.

in Ephesus have been contemplated by him after the great scheme had taken form in his mind. The scheme is sketched in Acts xix. 21, and must have been in process of formation sooner. Probably, although his residence in Ephesus (Acts xix. 1 ff.) was brought to an end a little before he had intended, yet he recognized then that the foundation and establishment of the congregation had been practically completed before his departure, and he had no thought of revisiting the congregation for serious and prolonged work, but had already fixed his mind on new spheres of action, leaving the Churches that were already sufficiently consolidated to be cared for by his coadjutors and by their own officials. Corinth still needed a good deal of work, and so perhaps did Thessalonica; but otherwise the year between leaving Ephesus and starting for Jerusalem was spent in the work described in Romans xv. 19.

This reasoning compels us to infer that, if the Acts is a trustworthy history, there is no possibility of placing the composition of this First Epistle to Timothy at any point between the date of Acts xix. 21 and the end of the book.

It is, of course, inconceivable the Epistle could have been written at any earlier stage than Acts xix. 21. A formed and organized Church in full working order is presupposed throughout the Epistle.<sup>1</sup> Paul was not writing instructions for a missionary in an inchoate congregation, but for the administrator of a complete Ekklesia.

We must therefore conclude that the Epistle either was written at some time later than the last verse of Acts, or that it is not the composition of Paul, but is a later forgery; and the latter supposition has been already dismissed as contrary to strong internal evidence.

Something also depends on the exact meaning which

<sup>1</sup> See especially Section XIV., EXPOSITOR, October 1909, p. 350; also Sections XV.-XVII.

we take from the words "shortly" and "tarry long";<sup>1</sup> these words can be used with very different connotations; and in our ignorance of the exact circumstances, it is impossible to say more than that Paul had in mind a return to and residence for some time in Ephesus, as a sequel to the work on which he was engaged while writing; but that he was fully conscious of causes for delay which might at any moment come into operation.

If his return is delayed, he wishes that Timothy should have before him an outline of the relation which must exist between the various parts of a congregation or household of God. There are various spheres of duty in an Ekklesia or Church of the Living God; and different members must be told off to the different kinds of work which have to be performed. In this allotment of work to suitable persons, and the vigorous orderly performance of it by all, lies the best guarantee for the permanence of the congregation, for the purity of its life, the soundness of its belief, and the vigour of its living faith. The individual can rarely maintain his existence apart from the society of which he is a member. The ordinary man is not strong enough to stand by himself. He is a part of a whole, and not self-complete and self-centred. The Christian ideal differed sharply and diametrically from the Stoic ideal, in spite of many outward and superficial resemblances between them.<sup>2</sup> The Stoic is complete in himself, master of his fate, superior to man and God, independent of circumstances, and able to attain perfection in the development of his own nature. The Christian is a member of a society, viz., the Church of the Living God; and he is largely

<sup>1</sup> ἐν τάχει and βραδύως.

<sup>2</sup> There are always certain to be many points of close resemblance between different adumbrations of the "good man," sketched in the same society by various members of it, even from totally different points of view.

(though not wholly) dependent on the maintenance of a healthy life and spirit in that society. The development of the individual is greatly conditioned by that of the society in which he is a part, and in its turn reacts on the development of the society.

It is, however, not Paul's purpose at this present time to insist on what he elsewhere strongly maintains, viz., the influence of the individual on his society and congregation, and the freedom and right of the individual to develop in his own line for his own self through his personal relation to Christ, i.e., through faith. There are not wanting suggestions throughout the Epistle of this point of view ; but it was not the view which needed to be impressed on the administrator of the Churches of Asia. In any case it is something outside of himself which is primarily important in the life of the Christian : he cannot attain to perfection through the independent development of his own nature. He must fix his eye and his being on an ideal beyond and apart from himself ; he must sacrifice and crucify his natural self in order to attain to the true end of his life ; he must live for Christ and in Christ. This end he most easily will attain through the performance of his special duty within his own society, and as a member of that society.

Yet the moment after Paul has enunciated this last idea of the practical means, he is struck with the incompleteness of his statement ; and he feels that he must lay additional and special stress on the ultimate aim, the ideal towards which every Christian must strive, the Divine Personality which each for himself must live for and in which each must merge his own wretched life, " this body of death." The higher truth and final aim is expressed in a remarkable passage, of rare but not unexampled tone and rhythm in Paul's writings, a passage which has been

generally regarded with good reason as a quotation from a Church hymn, because it has something of lyric devotional sound and intensity.

The mystery of godliness, the deep-lying idea which brings godliness within the power and grasp of man, is the personality of Christ,

Who was manifested in flesh,  
Was justified in spirit,  
Was seen by angels ;  
Was preached among the nations,  
Was believed on in the world,  
Was received up in glory.

In the first place, is this an extract from a Church hymn ? Scholars of the most diverse schools and modes of thought are agreed in recognizing the probability that this is so. It would suit the run of the thought admirably that Paul, after emphasizing the importance of the Christian society and congregation for the development of the individual, should express the truth which lies above and beyond this in a formula taken from the Church service. Nor is there any improbability that already within Paul's life-time belief had expressed itself in such forms : on the contrary, few will doubt that such crystallization of Christian thoughts in rhythmic form for use in the assembly of the congregation had probably taken place years before his death.

Another view is, indeed, not impossible, viz., that we have here the beginning of what would develop later into a hymn, and that Paul was transported by intensity of feeling at the moment into an almost lyrical expression of the supreme truth. Some scholars may prefer that view. The probability, however, seems distinctly to lie on the side of the first view, to which the overwhelming mass of opinion inclines. But, if that is correct, and if (as we believe), there is here a fragment of a Church hymn, then

we must draw the full inference from that fact. The Church had already accepted universally the marvellous truth of the pre-existence of Christ before He condescended to appear on earth.

That thought is, of course, often expressed in the writings of Paul, and lies at the basis of his thought. His whole philosophy of life and of religion—the two to him are one—is built upon it. But it would be important to have the further evidence, that this same thought was expressed in the plainest terms in a Church hymn, sung in the congregations as a fundamental article of the Christian Faith, already very soon after the middle of the first century, when probably none of the Gospels in the form in which we have them were actually in circulation,<sup>1</sup> and when many of those persons who had seen Jesus were still alive as witnesses of the actual facts.

So long as it is considered uncertain to what period and author the Pastoral Epistles belong, scholars of all schools will unite in recognizing these words as part of a Church hymn; and those who do not like the inferences that must be drawn if the Epistles are the work of Paul, can at present take refuge in the theory that they were written in the second century, and that the hymn belongs to that period. But the evidence will accumulate, and opinion will finally assume a settled form, that the Epistles belong to the period between A.D. 64 and 70; and then the force and implication of the old hymn will be irresistible as to the settled belief in the Church from the beginning. What was sung by all Christians in A.D. 65 must have been a fixed belief of all Christians from A.D. 29 onwards. It is impossible to suppose that any momentous change of

<sup>1</sup> That at least one of Luke's and Matthew's authorities and a first sketch of Mark, were composed by that time, seems to me beyond question.

opinions as to the facts which constituted the basis of the religion can have occurred during that period, while the original disciples were for the most part living.

In the second place, the meaning of the lines quoted requires a short explanation, not as to the religious aspect (which lies beyond the scope of these papers, and which, moreover, is as wide as the Christian religion), but simply as to the mere translation. They are poetic, and we must attempt to think them in prose. They are mystic and transcendental, and we must in a halting imperfect fashion express in more commonplace terms the purpose and order of the thought which they embody.

In Westcott and Hort's edition they are printed as two stanzas ; and this arrangement (which seems to be necessary for the right understanding of them) has been imitated above in the present Section. The first line, " Who was manifested in material form," implies the previous existence of a Being who took on Him the form and the nature of a human being in order to become knowable by men. The next line, " He was made just in spirit," must be interpreted in the sense that, though He became a human being, yet He attained the state of being just, i.e., the state of perfection, in spirit, i.e. in his own character and inner nature, not through the striving after an ideal beyond Himself (as men have to do), but in the orderly and natural evolution of His own personality.

The stanza ends with the line, " He was seen by angels " ; and this line (if the arrangement which we adopt from Westcott and Hort be correct) must be a completion and climax to the first two lines, for the following stanza begins a new series of ideas. Where Paul speaks of the angels his meaning is peculiarly hard for our modern minds to grasp : he is moving amid ideas which are strange and hardly comprehensible to us, ideas divided from us both by the

chasm that separates the Eastern from the Western thought, and by the vast difference between the thought of the first and the twentieth century. For example, who has rightly caught the meaning of "angels" in 1 Corinthians xi. 10? I cannot believe that this line of the hymn refers to some single incident or part in the life of the Saviour, not even to His Ascension into heaven and welcome by angels. It must, as I think, express a third side of His life in material form on the earth, though why such stress should be laid on His being seen by angels during that life, I confess my inability to understand. Perhaps the meaning is that, whereas angels only visit men on special occasions, His life was spent under the eye of angels continuously.<sup>1</sup>

The second stanza describes the effect which His earthly life produced on the world. He was heralded among nations: the distinction of Jew and Gentile disappears: the hymn is unconscious of any difference: "nations heard the message." He was believed on in the world, i.e. among mankind as a whole: the second line states the result of the first. He was taken up in glory: when His work was done, He resumed His Divine majesty and His Divine nature.

## XX. WARNING TO TIMOTHY AGAINST ASCETIC TEACHING.

With the end of chapter iii. we reach the conclusion of a topic which has been treated in a full, orderly fashion, and summed up in a completing and concluding paragraph. One need not, however, expect that the letter should end here. It is not the nature of a letter to expound one topic and stop when the topic has been completed: such a com-

<sup>1</sup> From the grammatical point of view, the tense (aorist) needs notice in this case. The aorist is right because the entire life is expressed as a statement of historical fact; there is no reference to a series of appearances of angels to see, as angels come to visit men when sent to do so: "He was seen by angels."



position would be a treatise, not a letter. The writer of the letter now goes on to address his correspondent further.

The prophetic spirit says in express terms that in later times some shall apostatize from the Faith. The expression, "later times," has no reference to the end of the world; it only sums up the scope of the prophetic utterance which Paul is quoting.

That some definite prophecy is here alluded to seems inevitable. In a sentence which condemns so strongly all hypocrisy and acting, or playing a part, one cannot suppose that Paul is himself playing a part and quoting a fictitious prophecy. Some utterance to this effect had been made in the Ephesian Church, and was well known to the Apostle and to Timothy. The prophecy need not be and ought not to be interpreted as the forecast of a future that was still distant: it was probably a forecast when it was uttered, but it is now being verified in the experience of the Ephesian Church. The present tense "saith" (*λέγει*) is used, not the past tense; the word of God, whether in scripture or in prophecy, is thought of as outside of and unconditioned by time: "God saith," "I am," and so on.

If this passage were the only one in the Epistle that referred to false teaching, there would be a strong temptation to regard it as referring to a definite tendency and school of thought in the Ephesian or some other Asian Church. But the character of the other references to the false teachers forbids this view, which on closer scrutiny does not suit very well the language even in this passage. The "seducing spirits and doctrines of devils" must be understood to describe some species of philosophy or life outside the Church, which exercised a misleading attraction on those who were within its bounds. The teachers, who were still within the bounds of the Church, caught up this seductive philosophy and practice, and thereby exercised a ruinous

influence on some Christians. The pupils went beyond their teachers, pressing the teaching to its logical conclusions and "falling away from the Faith," i.e. separating themselves from the Church, and attaching themselves to the sect in which the doctrine and practice took its most logically complete form. That the pupil should carry the lessons of a teacher (whether they be good or bad in their tendency) to a more thorough-going extreme than the master contemplated is a common fact, and many examples might be quoted; e.g., the pupil of an Anglo-Catholic has often carried the Catholic teaching to what seemed to him a logical conclusion, and joined the Roman Church.

Such a result was actually taking place at Ephesus. The prophecy of the Spirit was the statement of a tendency prevalent at the moment. Paul was wholly occupied in the battle of his own time, and had no interest in warning Timothy against a danger which might become serious in some future period. He is arming Timothy for a war that has already begun, and which will grow more serious if the enemy is not resisted instantly, skilfully, and powerfully.

The teachers, who found this teaching profitable and useful for their purpose of obtaining pupils, were fully conscious that it was false; they were mere actors, repeating formulae that they did not believe, and thus earning money by means that were disgraceful; they were "branded in their own conscience" as criminals, and knew the brand. Their status as teachers, seeking to attract pupils, has been described in Sections VIII. and IX.;<sup>1</sup> and the passage iv. 1-3 explains more clearly the situation.

The special kind of false doctrine which Paul had in mind

<sup>1</sup> EXPOSITOR, August and September, 1909, pp. 167 ff., 264 ff. Simon Magus at Samaria, as described by Luke, may be taken as a typical example of the false teacher who is within the Church and most dangerous to it,

is next described. It was of ascetic character, forbidding marriage, and prescribing abstention from meats,<sup>1</sup> i.e. from certain kinds of food (as, for example, the Pythagorean teaching forbade the eating of beans). He condemns in express terms the second prohibition, stating the noble principle that "every thing created by God is honourable, and nothing is to be rejected if taken with thanksgiving."

This principle does not imply that there was no reason in the Jewish distinction of foods, and prohibition of some foods; but it does imply that no created animal is in itself impure. It does not imply that every kind of animal food should be eaten without discrimination; but it does imply that the discrimination should be on grounds of reason and good-sense, and not merely of religious law.

It deserves note that Paul says nothing formally in the way of argument against this misguided prohibition of marriage. Either he regarded that prohibition as sufficiently condemned by its own irrationality and impossibility, and by the previous teaching in this Epistle about the duties and qualifications of Church officials, or he had some other reason for passing tacitly over the subject, after once declaring in one sweeping statement, that the prohibition of marriage for any class or sect of human beings is a false and daemonic doctrine. It is possible in a somewhat lame fashion to extract from the argument about meats an argument about marriage (as many commentators do); but this seems to be a mere makeshift, devised to explain away the contrast between the clear and explicit argument in the one case, and the silence in the other.

Might we not suppose that Paul felt it better to refrain from entering here on this large topic, in which careful dis-

<sup>1</sup> It is not Paul's purpose to specify the nature and scope of the prohibition: he may probably have included more than one school of teaching about foods, e.g., perhaps (1) Jewish distinction of clean and unclean foods, as such, (2) prohibition of all flesh-eating (which was a common teaching in certain Oriental lands).

tinctions had to be drawn ? He had himself in writing to the Corinthians strongly defended the right of voluntary celibacy in cases where one felt that one could serve God better by remaining unmarried. He had even maintained, or at least his words might be understood to maintain, that the life of voluntary singleness was the life of devotion to God, and more honourable than the married life, and that marriage was a concession to the weakness of human nature (1 Cor. vii. 1 ff.). There is, I think, no real inconsistency between the teaching of Paul in the two cases. In writing to the Corinthians he had to defend the right of individual choice and initiative against (as I believe) their suggestion that universal marriage would be a salutary rule to prescribe in the Church. Here he has to defend human society and human nature against an asceticism so exaggerated as to be unnatural and irrational. But, at least some rather full explanation and distinction would have been necessary, if any argument were introduced ; and Paul saw no need for an elaborate statement on the subject at this moment.

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