

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.
Assistant Editor: T. J. McCORMACK.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER.
MARY CARUS.

VOL. XVI. (NO. 1)

JANUARY, 1902.

NO. 548

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CHICAGO

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The Legends of Genesis

By DR. HERMANN GUNKEL,

Professor of Old Testament Theology in the University of Berlin.

Translated from the German by W. H. CARRUTH, Professor in the University of Kansas. Pages, 164. Cloth, \$1.00 net (4s. 6d. net).

JUST PUBLISHED.

This book is a translation of the Introduction to Professor Gunkel's great work *Commentar über Genesis*, recently published in Göttingen. The *Commentar* itself is a new translation and explanation of Genesis,—a bulky book, and in its German form of course accessible only to American and English scholars, and not to the general public. The present *Introduction* contains the gist of Professor Gunkel's *Commentar*, or exposition of the latest researches on Genesis in the light of analytical and comparative mythology.

Professor Gunkel is an orthodox Protestant theologian who appreciates to the utmost the intrinsically religious value of the Bible. He says: "The conclusion that any given one of these narratives is legend is by no means intended to detract from the value of the narrative; it only means that the one who pronounces it has perceived somewhat of the poetic beauty of the narrative and thinks that he has thus arrived at an understanding of the story. Only ignorance can regard such a conclusion as irreverent, for it is the judgment of reverence and love. These poetic narratives are the most beautiful possession which a people brings down through the course of its history, and the legends of Israel, especially those of Genesis, are perhaps the most beautiful and most profound ever known.

"A child, indeed, unable to distinguish between reality and poetry, loses something when it is told that its dearest stories are 'not true.' But the modern theologian should be farther developed. The evangelical churches and their chosen representatives would do well not to dispute the fact that Genesis contains legends—as has been done too frequently—but to recognise that the knowledge of this fact is the indispensable condition to an historical understanding of Genesis. This knowledge is already too widely diffused among those trained in historical study ever again to be suppressed. It will surely spread among the masses of our people, for the process is irresistible. Shall not we Evangelicals take care that it be presented to them in the right spirit?"

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Yours cordially
John Henry Borrows.

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THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTIAN POETRY.

BY F. W. FITZPATRICK.

SIR Thomas Phillipp's splendid collection of early Christian writings, Ebert's researches in Christian literature, particularly his *Geschichte der christlich-lateinischen Literatur* and Boissier's indexes to Christian verse have made the task of tracing that poetry back to its origin an easy one.

Undoubtedly all the elements that went to make up Christian poetry were, so to speak, created in the first two centuries of the Church's life. That period was replete with the wonderful legends, the symbols, the passionate discussions, the beliefs, terrifying as well as pleasant, that have inspired all Christian poets even to our own times.

That formative period gave us this foundation with a sort of spontaneity; that skeleton, perfectly articulated, was given to us at once, but it took centuries to build up the form about it, the flesh, the sinews, and to give it life. It has always been so. The form and foundation, expression and thought, while inseparable in the finished article, are vastly different and seldom are both of the same period. Perfection is where the two are in perfect harmony, and our great literary epochs are those in which it has been possible to express the thoughts of the times in a style that was really appropriate thereto, and those epochs are few and far between.

It was quite natural that these new doctrines of Christianity gave rise to and were expressed in new forms also, however crude. Christianity absolutely broke away from ancient customs and beliefs and it was most natural that it should also seek to cut loose from the ancient arts, expressions, forms. Its literature must needs be original and absolutely without precedent, at least so thought the early Fathers.

The very first of Christian poets was Commodus, or "Commodianus Mendicus Christi," as he styled himself. His verses are built upon lines absolutely different from any of the known rules of versification that obtained in his time. His mode of thought even seems different from that of the other literati. His style is vigorous and his piety undoubted. He had many disciples in his life, preached a good deal, was a saintly bishop, but was soon forgotten after death.

It is a strange thing that the brilliant works of many masters of that time have been lost to posterity while the verses of this rather obscure follower of a new and despised sect should be preserved to us intact. Many were found and gathered together in the 17th century and they give us an intimate insight into the character of the man who wrote them and the beliefs of his time. One amusing thing about them was that 'spite of the humility he constantly preached, his verses are filled with allusions to himself and many of his acrostics are built upon his own name.

Our poet was born in Palestine, at Gaza. There is some question as to where he lived; some think he lived in the Orient, while others place him in Africa. Probability points to the latter place as his writings are in Latin and it is therefore more than likely that he inhabited a Roman dependance. Born a pagan he was converted by reading one of the letters of St. Paul. He preached charity to the poor and followed the pagans with a sharp stick. He converted by heroic means, picturing to his heathen auditors the terrors of hell-fire to which they surely would be condemned did they not repent and come into the true fold. It is a matter of record even, that he was sometimes not averse to using physical persuasion in directing possible candidates to the true faith. He was ironical, quick, somewhat lacking in delicacy, and preached and wrote to the people in their own language, the language of the street. His invectives and sarcasm anent pagan worship and gods were scathing and fierce. He was prone to holy anger, and the Jews, particularly the Jewish Christians, were his especial torments. He always spoke of them as "thick of hide and thick of skull."

His exhortations to women to forego their frivolous ways is most interesting and not without point even to-day. "You dress before mirrors," says he to them, "you curl your hair; you smear yourselves with cosmetics and you lay false colors upon your cheeks . . . believe me, all this is not necessary for an honest woman's adornment, and may lead to your burning in the eternal fires of hell hereafter." Perpetual fire was the club he swung over the heads of all, the last words of his arguments: "Beware, be-

ware," cries he, "or one day you will find yourself in the roaring furnace."

He deploras that in his time (250 A. D.) there were some people in the Church who lacked vigor, whose Christianity was weak-kneed and who winked at the pleasures of life—"gentlemen fearing to hurt the feelings of their people by presenting them with a too vigorous Christianity." He preached the cutting away from the affections of this life, he forebade his followers to weep over the death of their children, he exhorted them to make no plans for their obsequies—"humble burial befits a humble Christian."

During his latter years there was a violent persecution of the Christians which gave him added opportunities to preach and write eternal fire upon the heads of the enemies of the Church. Whether really believing it or merely using it for a figure of speech we have no means of knowing, but he virtually rewrote the Apocalypse, and partly in verse, in which he clearly foretells of great upheavals and the coming of two antichrists soon after his time. He predicted the overthrow of Rome, the ravaging of the Orient by the old Belial of the Jews who, in turn, was to be overthrown by the "faithful nations" that God was preserving on the other side of the Euphrates, victorious people who would overthrow all opposition without loss to themselves and who would rule the world in great prosperity for a thousand years. He had facts to found his prophecy upon, for Rome was indeed sorely beset, on the North by the Goths, on the East by the Persians and within her portals factions were threatening an uprising. "Luget in aeternum, quae se jactabat aeterna!" was written as would be a cry of triumph.

Commodus had scant respect for any rules of versification. Accustomed as we are to the fine metre and quality of Virgil and Horace, the verses of Commodus are rustic indeed. They certainly make up in strength, however, what they lack in elegance. And yet he shows undoubted signs of being thoroughly conversant with the authorities of his and prior times. He speaks of the musical versification of the Greeks, and of the mistakes the Romans made in trying to copy their harmony of sound without paying due attention to the measure in their verses.

Commodus was a precursor of the poetry of the Middle Ages. Some great men are seemingly born ahead of their time and give us a taste and a glimpse at what is to be perfected long after them; Commodus, on the contrary, gave us an example of the decadence of the Middle Ages and worked hard to bring it about even in his

own time. Weak as it was, the society of the third century preserved memories of the arts and the letters of the past, so we may well imagine that Commodus' bucolic verses were not well received by his contemporaries.

His case proved that it was not possible to absolutely renounce ancient art. Christianity realised that it had to accommodate itself to it. St. Paul had warned the Christians to "remain each in the place where he was when God called him." And this precept did much to place Christianity upon a firm basis. Commodus' tactics were aggressive. The poets succeeding him were diplomatic. The old civilisation would have offered far greater resistance had Christianity proclaimed from every housetop that it was seeking to destroy that civilisation. It contented itself with urging that civilisation's reformation and jealously guarded every element therein that could be preserved. We find this illustrated in all the Christians did. Their churches, their paintings were adaptations, not revolutions, in art. What more natural than that it should adapt its literature along the lines of the times?

The world at that time fully apotheosised the "pleasures of the intellect." Greek refinement was all-prevailing. It was a time when rhetoricians and grammarians marched behind the legions and established themselves in most distant countries. No nation escaped the Hellenic influence in its civilisation. "The Jews themselves, when they left their little Palestine to traffic in Egypt and Syria, began reading Homer and Plato and were surprised to be pleased thereby." All the universe admired the same standard and tried to copy it. Christianity could not long withstand the subtle influence and resigned itself to tolerate this other power that it could not conquer; and, like it, it has withstood the ravages of revolutions and time and shares with it even to-day in the government of the human intellect.

Observe this Hellenic influence upon such writers as St. Clement for instance. His was the polished writing of the man of the times conveying great spiritual news in the florid language of his pagan masters.

Christianity and ancient literature!

Neither has been able to eliminate the other nor has there ever been a perfect union between them. At times the religious element has been ahead, witness the Middle Ages; other times there has been a revival of ancient classics as in the period of the Renaissance. And this conflict, we may say, has been the moral history of humanity that has been written during the past 1900 years. At all

times in the Church has there been an element seeking to overthrow all that came before, thinking it sacrilegious and blasphemous to use any of the ancient forms, or observances, or arts that were necessarily pagan and therefore sinful; and there have always been others who claimed it perfectly justifiable to modify and use these old forms, arts and mode of speech in expounding the great truths of Christianity, or in erecting its cathedrals or in writing its history. We have these two elements splendidly illustrated in the two earliest Christian writers in the West, Minucius Felix and Tertullian.

We know little of Minucius Felix. Although we have many of his writings, he, unlike the *humble* Commodus, has little to say about himself. We do know from others that he was a distinguished lawyer in Rome and lived toward the end of the Antonine period. His "Octavius" is his best known work. It is a short apology for the Christian religion, to which he had been converted somewhat late in life. An elegant discourse, though short, not a dialectic but rather a dainty drama full of interesting detail and written in the finished style of his day. Returning to Rome after a long absence he meets his friends Octavius and Caecilius and they go for a long walk on the pleasant banks of the Tiber. Octavius is also a Christian but his other friend is still a pagan. A discussion begins; or, rather, it is a pleasant intercourse of friends, not a debate of theologians.

Our author kept well in mind the audience he was addressing. He wished to please them. He did not quote the sacred writings; dogmas were merely touched upon as an aside. He sought to bring them to his views by the mildest persuasions rather than by the sterner convincing used by Commodus.

The words he put in Caecilius' mouth in defense of the ancient forms are plausible arguments, and you may recognise in them a line of thought indulged in by many of our friends to day. Caecilius was not a fanatic. With him there was less passion than prejudice, his reasoning was that of a man of the world, a politician rather than a devotee. "Why," argues he, "do people wish to disturb the ancient cult? It has existed for centuries, is accepted by the masses whose opinions are formed and habits well set." What was the use of disturbing all this, of stirring up questions of belief and changing one's mode of living when the old life was so pleasant? Why propound these weighty problems when it was so much pleasanter to live resting in peace? Of course, toward the end of the discussion he was won over. Octavius is made to clinch the

arguments by some unanswerable questions and poor Caecilius, at his wits' ends, has to acknowledge that he is conquered, "but he too claims a victory in having conquered and rectified his error." The book is more than entertaining, it is subtly convincing. The author seeks a common ground. He tries to show that even ancient philosophies were not incompatible with Christianity. Christianity, after all, is but these philosophies perfected. He developed little by little the ideas of a Providence, of a universal fraternity, the after-life, and the unity of a God, and one falls into his way of thinking naturally and easily.

He is clearly a pupil of the old school and he does honor to his masters. His phrasing is brilliant, his parts well balanced and his works "finished" to a high degree. Seneca is clearly one of his best liked authors and he imitates him in many ways.

Far different is Tertullian. There is nothing in common between them, excepting, possibly, their ardor and the sincerity of their faith. Both sought the advancement of the faith so dear to them, its triumph, but by radically different methods. The one, we might say, using a hypodermic syringe, the other with a sledgehammer. The one counselled a sort of compromise with the pagans, the other looked upon all such weak methods as foolish and criminal.

St. Jerome was a great admirer of Tertullian and has preserved to us many of the latter's writings. Born in Carthage he frequented pagan schools until well along in young manhood. Brought up in such an atmosphere his religious ardor is all the more surprising. For we know that the young men in Africa, or rather, the young men of the better class, were indeed dilettanti. They spent most of their time in the theatres, at the pantomime or in listening to famed rhetoricians "who said nothing but said it elegantly." His conversion caused some commotion, for he was a man of importance. Son of a consular centurion, a Roman of high degree, he abandoned his toga to wear the simpler pallium, or Greek mantle, much affected by the early Christians and the severer philosophers. When his friends berated him for his change of costume, his abandoning of the dress of a Roman gentleman (dress then, as now, was an important factor in the life of men) he reminded them that Epicurus and Zeno had led the same mode of life as he. You see, his Christianity was then but in a formative state. He quoted not his Master but referred them to men they knew of. A few years later he indulged in no such trimming of his sails. He tells us himself that he never passed a temple or altar to a pagan god but

that he mounted its steps and proclaimed, and loudly, the new faith. It was no longer a question with him how Epicurus or Zeno might have dressed. He wore his humble garb and lived his simple life in imitation of the Saviour. He tells us that his discourses did not "tickle the ears nor arouse the curiosity of his auditors, that is the business of orators and charlatans. I show my listeners their faults and teach them how they should live." And yet his style has a certain elegance and must have aroused the curiosity of his auditors. It is full of piquant anecdotes, epigrams and philosophical surprises.

He abominated idolatry and yet he argued that a Christian could attend to his civic duties without sin, and these duties were largely mixed with idolatrous practices. He tells us that if these duties lead them to where there may be a sacrifice to the pagan gods, they are there to attend to these duties and not to the sacrifice and that they should not get up and leave when the sacrifice begins, but to spare the feelings of their pagan friends who may also be there. He kept away from the theatres and counseled his followers to do so also and yet he admits that it is a great trial because the spectacles are certainly fascinating. He seems to understand the weakness of the flesh and if he lays aside his sledgehammer once in a while we must not blame him. There was a finer line of thought in his composition that prompts us to understand that it was not vacillation on his part so much as sincere appreciation of the difficulties in introducing a new faith to a people prejudiced by generations upon generations who believed and followed the forms of old. We must admit, however, that there are some rather glaring inconsistencies in his works for which there can hardly be even the excuse of political license. For instance, he admires the family, while a page or two farther on he deplors that there have to be children and strenuously advocates celibacy. He advises that his followers attend to their civic duties, and yet he makes it clear that they cannot be magistrates without sin, they cannot teach school and in fact there is nothing that they *can* do. He tells us that he does not write for the literati and the erudite, "to them who come to vomit up in public the undigested remains of an alleged science acquired under the porticos and in the academies." He labors rather, "to convince the simple, the ignorant, who have learned nothing but that which is known in the streets and in the shops."

These two currents we have glanced at, finally had to come together. Reconciliation between the old and the new was absolutely

essential. As long as it was believed that the end of time was near and that the reign of Christ was soon to begin there was no reason for providing for the future ; but, when it was felt that things were to endure and there seemed to be no immediate prospect of the world's dissolution, living became a problem, and it was clearly evident that strength could only be gained by concessions and compromises. It was toward the end of the third century that this work of joining the new with the old began. It became necessary for the advancement of Christianity that not only the poor and the lowly be attracted toward it but that the nobles, the governing class, be brought into line, and for them Christianity had to be clothed with a garb of elegance and refinement which could only be done by using the elegant apparel then at hand ; nothing new in the arts and letters had been devised. Tertullian had said that no Cæsar could be a Christian ; soon after his time every effort of the Church was in that very direction and history shows us with what success.

In architecture, painting and sculpture this borrowing of pagan forms was fallen into very readily, in fact the Christian artists knew no other forms. To-day in the catacombs, in the sculptured reliefs and in the crude paintings of the early Christian artists is that influence evident to the extent even that it is difficult indeed sometimes to distinguish between a Christ and a Jupiter or Orpheus.

So with letters. Even the school of the good Tertullian soon abandoned the severity of that master. St. Cyprian who glorifies himself in being his pupil shows us none of his master's severity ; he aims rather at elegance of diction, he imitates Seneca and Cicero and gives us verses artistic almost as those of Minucius. And Cyprian's successors go farther still. They are veritable professors of rhetoric and clothe their Christian ideas in all the glory of pagan verse. Poetry more and more became the channel through which the fathers steered through the "brook of belief" and more and more was that poetry in metre and in rhyme, in measure and in time borrowed, aye, bodily taken from the pagan literature of the period. In fact we are given entire poems from this literature with but a transposition of the names of the gods. Some Christian authors, in fact, but took the celebrated works of the ancients and explained how these undoubtedly but described Christian beliefs in metaphor and parable ; the Phoenix of old is but the Church to them ; the dragons but devils in the ancient form ; Jupiter but a poetic suggestion of the Father !

This is particularly noticeable at the time when Christianity

mounted even to the throne of the Cæsars. Prose and verse of that period seem hardly Christian enough to suit some of us. There is too much of Cicero in Lactantius, too much of Virgil in Juvencus, but this was soon corrected. It was the age of the great Theodosius that found a happy medium. Some claim that Christian poetry dates but from that time. It only remained for the poets of that age to perfectly blend Christian belief with classic expression, to cover with beautiful flesh the already articulated skeleton we have been glancing at, and from that happy combination of reformed thought and pagan elegance has sprung not only Christian poetry but modern society.

Since St. Justin considered that Socrates was a sort of Christian before Christ, are we not justified in saying that Seneca, that Cicero and that Virgil were indeed prophets? For, certainly, through their unwitting agency has Christianity been preserved to us in its most beautiful form.