

CRYPTIC LEGENDS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE.

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“Now all these tales and ten thousand others which are even more wonderful originate in a common emotion of the mind.”

Plato, *Politicus*, § 269.

THE discussion in the March number of *The Open Court* upon Mr. Kampmeier's article on “Pious Frauds,”—more particularly the fraud concerning the finding of the ancient “Book of Law” in the temple by the high priest Hilkiah—and the more recent article in the August number by Mr. Lewis upon Joseph Smith, bring up a number of interesting parallels in the religious history of ancient and modern nations. Most truly, as Mr. Lewis observes, “there is a similarity in the announcements of the prophets of new revelations.” The purported discovery of a sacred record which had remained hidden for hundreds of years, was the trick perpetrated by the high priest upon the young and credulous king Josiah, and this same deception we will find has always been one of the strongest devices of the priestly craft, whenever it is desired either to enforce some new law or dispensation or simply to give laws and rites already in existence a more ancient and divine significance.

Plato in the second book of his Republic very plainly alludes to deceptions of this kind when he speaks of “mendicant prophets who go to the doors of the rich and persuade them that they have the power of expiating any crime which they or their fathers had committed.” As evidence of this “they produce a host of books by Musæus and Orpheus, born as they say of the moon and the Muses, according to which they perform their mystic rites, persuading not only private persons, but cities likewise, that there are absolutions and purgations from iniquities by means of sacrifices, and this for the benefit both of the living and of the dead; these rites they call the Mysteries which absolve us from evils in the

other world, but dreadful things they say await those who do not offer sacrifice."

It is especially around these ancient mysteries, whether Grecian, Roman, or Egyptian, that we find such a wealth of what we will term cryptic legends, and this perhaps is not surprising since the leading motive of all these cults consisted in the search and discovery by the novitiate of some hidden law or truth. One of the most interesting and typical of such legends is told by Pausanias in his "Description of Greece," and relates to the re-establishment of the mysteries of the "Great Goddesses" at the refounding of Messene. According to Pausanias (Messinics, chap. 20) the Messenian hero and leader Aristomenes, in the course of the war with Sparta, was persuaded by the oracle that the time for the destruction of Messene was at hand. It happened that "the Messenians possessed something belonging to their secret mysteries which if destroyed would be the eternal ruin of Messene, but if preserved would according to the oracles of Lycus, son of Pandion, be the means of restoring Messene in some future period to her pristine condition. This arcanum Aristomenes carried away as soon as it was night and buried it in the most solitary part of the mountain Ithome, as he was of the opinion that Zeus Ithomatus and the other divinities who had preserved Messene up to that time, would carefully guard the sacred deposit and not suffer the Lacedemonians to take away their only hope of possessing Messene again in some after period of time."

Pausanias was a born romancer and keeps his reader in suspense as to the nature of this sacred deposit through five long chapters in which he describes the destruction of Messene by the Spartans and the scattering of its inhabitants through the cities of Greece and Sicily. At length in Chapter 26 he tells of the restoration of the descendents of the Messenian exiles to their ancient home after an interval of 287 years, and there describes the manner in which the buried arcanum was recovered and what its nature was.

"Epiteles, the son of Aeschynes, whom the Argives chose for their general and the restorer of Messene, was commanded in a dream to dig up that part of the earth on Mount Ithome, which was situated between a yew-tree and a myrtle and take out of a brazen chamber which he would find there, an old woman worn out with her confinement and almost dead. Epiteles, therefore, as soon as it was day went to the place which had been described to him in the dream and dug up a brazen urn. This he immediately took to Epaminondas who, when he had heard the dream, ordered him to

remove the cover and see what it contained. Epiteles, therefore, as soon as he had sacrificed and prayed to the god who had given the dream, opened the urn and found in it thin plates of tin rolled up like a book and in which the mysteries of the "Great Goddesses" were written; and this was the secret which Aristomenes had buried in that place."

Pausanias tells this tale with his characteristic piety; and without suspicion of guile states as his authority for the finding of the buried plates that "it is asserted by certain persons of the family of the priests as may be seen in their writings." It is scarcely necessary to add that the entire tale was fabricated by these priests to give their newly established ceremonials and laws a semblance of greater antiquity and authority.

A most remarkable parallel, even in the minutest details, to the above tale by Pausanias is found in the present age right in our own country in the accounts of the Morman Church concerning the Book of Mormon. The records of this book state that Mormon and his son Moroni, when the remnant of true believers upon this continent, the Nephites, were on the point of being exterminated by the barbarous Lamanites (as the Messinians were in danger from the Spartans), collected the 16 books of records kept by successive kings and priests into one volume, adding a few personal reminiscences of their own. These records were buried by Moroni on the hill Cumorah (as Aristomenes did on Mount Ithome) in the year 420 A. D., he being divinely assured (as was Aristomenes) that the hidden tablets would one day be rediscovered. This great event happened as we know in 1823 A. D., when on the night of September 21 the angel Moroni appeared three times to Joseph Smith and told him where the buried plates were deposited. (As was the case with Epiteles, son of Aeschynes). Smith went to this place four years later, when after a period of probation (compare the sacrifices and prayers of Epiteles) an angel delivered into his charge a stone box in which was a volume of gold plates fastened together with rings (compare the old woman in her underground chamber in the story of Pausanias). These golden plates were inscribed with small writing in "reformed Egyptian," which Smith was enabled to translate by means of the marvelous crystals Urin and Thummim, and which translation now constitutes the Book of Mormon.

A comparison of the stories of the burial and recovery of the mysteries of the "Great Goddesses" and of the Book of Mormon might seem almost to justify one in saying that the founder of the Morman Church had been guilty of plagiarism. Yet we are not

warranted in making this assumption. Smith probably never heard of Pausanias. The priestly mind in all ages has shown itself to be intensely human in its operations and the laws which influence the workings of the human mind, we may say, are as fixed as those which govern the operations of inanimate nature. Under a given set of conditions we may always expect a definite result, so that if the necessities which govern the establishment or existence of a form of religion among an ignorant race of men ever demand it, we may always look for the discovery by the priesthood of a hidden Book of Law, and usually under peculiarly miraculous and mystifying circumstances.

An interesting legend in Roman history, belonging to this class of religious forgeries, relates to the finding of the sacred books of Numa Pompilius. This story is told by Livy, Piso, Varro, Plutarch, Pliny, and other ancient historians, each with minor variations of its own, though in the essential facts all these writers are in complete agreement. The substance of the legend as narrated by Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* XIII. 27) is as follows: "Cassius Hemina, a writer of great antiquity, states in his fourth Book of Annals that Cneius Terentius, the scribe, while engaged in digging on his land on Mount Janiculum came to a coffer in which Numa, the former king of Rome, had been buried, and that in this coffer were found some books of his. This happened in the consulship of Cornelius and Baebius, the interval between whose consulship and the reign of Numa was 535 years. These books were made of paper and a thing most remarkable is the fact that they lasted so many years buried in the ground. Terentius stated that in nearly the middle of the coffer there lay a square stone bound on every side with cords enveloped in wax: upon this stone the books had been placed, and it was through this precaution he thought that they had not rotted. The books too were carefully covered with citrus leaves, and it was through this in his belief that they had been protected from the attack of worms. In these books were written certain doctrines relative to the Pythagorean philosophy. They were burned by Petilius, the prætor, because they treated of philosophical subjects."

Livy gives nearly the same account and states that the books were burned because they were hostile to the religious views of that time. Most of the other ancient historians, however, state that the books were of two kinds, one set in Greek upon the Pythagorean philosophy and the other in Latin upon the decrees of Numa concerning pontifical rights and religious ceremonials. While the Greek

books were burned, the decrees of Numa upon sacerdotal matters were carefully preserved by the pontifices and were the final resort in all matters pertaining to the religious life of ancient Rome.

This story of the finding of Numa's books was credited by all ancient writers, yet it is now recognized to be as mythical as the stories of old Numa himself,—a pious king who held converse with the gods and whose reign of two score years fell in a golden age when the earth was filled with peace and plenty. The decrees ascribed to Numa, excellent treatises as they may have been, were purely a fabrication and may with safety be placed upon the "Index of Pious Frauds."

It is interesting to compare with this story of Numa a cryptic legend which has made its way into the complex ritual of the higher degrees of Freemasonry. This is the so-called "Legend of Enoch," which appears in the thirteenth degree of the Scottish Rite and was introduced early in the eighteenth century by Chevalier Ramsay, who by means of his brilliant scholarship and fertile imagination embellished the symbolism of Masonry in a manner hitherto unknown. The legend is partly made up of material found in the Talmud and in Josephus, and is in substance as follows:

The Patriarch Enoch, who like Numa lived a most peaceful and pious life,—holding communion with angels, teaching men the knowledge of the arts and sciences, and establishing rites of religious worship, became impressed with the wickedness of the world and retired to Mount Moriah, where he was told by the Sacred Presence of the coming deluge and commanded to preserve the knowledge which he had gained to those who should survive the flood. Enoch accordingly built a subterranean temple of nine vaults, in the lowest of which he placed a triangular plate of gold containing in ineffable characters the true name of the Deity. The uppermost arch was closed with a door of stone and so covered that all traces of the opening were concealed. After the deluge all knowledge of this temple and its contents was lost until it was accidentally uncovered during the course of the erection of King Solomon's Temple and the buried secret revealed. (Mackey's *Encyclopædia of Freemasonry*, 1898, p. 254.)

While such a story as the above has but little historical value as a legend, it has an interest in showing how the human mind, whenever it wishes to create an atmosphere of sanctity or mystery, runs inevitably in the same channel.

The search by the newly initiated candidate for some lost truth and its discovery constitute the central point upon which the air

of mystery surrounding the workings of the modern lodge depends, and we find the same running back through the Middle Ages to the mysteries of the ancients. The legend, always of a cryptic character, under guise of which the search is made may be recited or dramatized with the novitiate as a silent or active member of the *dramatis personæ*. This method of instruction, when properly conducted, is a most forcible one and impresses the mind of the neophyte to a far greater degree than could be done by the simple statement of the truth itself. As the Overseer of the Great Institution in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* well observes, "when you tell a man at once and straightforward, the purpose of an object, he fancies there is nothing in it. Certain secrets, even if known to every one, men find that they must still reverence by concealment and silence; for this works on modesty and good morals."

Good examples of this method may be seen in the mystery and morality plays of the mediæval age, such for example as "Everyman." "Good Dedes," the only means of salvation which Everyman possesses has long been buried in the ground and her very existence forgotten. At length Everyman discovers her after a painful search and she exclaims,

"Here I lye colde in the grounde
Thy sins hath me sore bounde
That I cannot sterve."

The effort of Everyman to uncover Good-Dedes from her place of bondage is the chief episode in this weird yet most tragic piece of early dramatic art.

The same use of the cryptic legend is found in all the ancient mysteries. The exact manner of presenting the legend is unknown to us, yet enough has been written by the Greek historians to show the general plan of its structure. There was always some deity or hero, possessed of attributes most beneficial to the race of men,—as Persephone, Bacchus or Osiris; then there was the disappearance or murder of this personage brought about by some enemy—as Pluto, the Titans, or Typhon. This event was followed by the despairing search for the lost one by some relative or friend—as Demeter or Isis—until finally the drama is brought to a triumphant close by the restoration of the departed to the anxious searchers.

In the case of the legends of these mysteries we have typical examples of solar myths, as was well known to Plutarch and Diodorus who have given us an explanation of their meaning. The loss of the life-giving heat of the sun during the months of winter and its reappearance in spring to the expectant earth are well exem-

plified in each of these legends. But while an astronomical explanation of the myth may have constituted a part of the truths inculcated in the ancient mysteries, the principal lesson which the initiated drew from them was not that of the renovating power of nature but the hope of immortality after death,—a hope which Cicero tells us was truly strengthened among those who had partaken of these mystic rites.

The search for the body of Osiris in the Egyptian mysteries has its parallel in the search for the body of Hiram in Freemasonry. The origin of this legend of Hiram, unlike that of Enoch, is shrouded in mystery; but it is probably only another form of the same archetypal solar myth.¹ The same idea crops up among the Rosicrucians in the story of Christian Rosenkreuz,² whose body was lost and found again after 120 years in a state of perfect preservation.

The discovery of a hidden body to the searchers in the mysteries brings up a number of interesting mediæval legends, which narrate how the bodies of young maidens long buried were uncovered and found free from taint of corruption. The finding of the body of St. Cecilia, whose resting-place in the catacombs of Calixtus was revealed to Pope Paschal in a dream, is an instance of this type of legend. But most interesting of all such myths is the discovery of the body of Julia, daughter of Claudius, which is thus told by Symonds:³

“On the 18th of April 1485 a report circulated in Rome that some Lombard workmen had discovered a Roman sarcophagus while digging in the Appian Way. It was a marble tomb, engraved with the inscription, ‘Julia, Daughter of Claudius,’ and inside the coffer lay the body of a most beautiful girl of 15 years preserved by precious unguents from corruption and the injury of time. The bloom of youth was still upon her cheeks and lips; her eyes and mouth were half open; her long hair floated around her shoulder. She was instantly removed, so goes the legend, to the Capitol, and then began a procession of pilgrims from all the quarters of Rome to gaze upon this saint of the old Pagan world. In the eyes of those enthusiastic worshipers her beauty was beyond imagination or description: she was far fairer than any woman of the modern age could hope to be. At last Innocent VIII feared lest the orthodox faith should suffer by this new cult of a heathen corpse. Julia was

¹ See also article by H. R. Evans, “Egyptian Mysteries and Modern Freemasonry,” *Open Court*, XVII, p. 437.

² Told by J. V. Andreã in his *Fama Fraternalitatis des Ordens des Rosenkreuzcs*, printed in Cassel in 1614.

³ J. A. Symonds. *Renaissance in Italy*, Vol. I, 17.

buried secretly and at night by his direction, and naught remained in the Capitol but her empty marble coffin.

"The tale is told by several writers with slight variations. One says that the girl's hair was yellow, another that it was the glossiest black. What foundation for the legend may really have existed need not here be questioned. Let us rather use the mythus as a parable of the ecstatic devotion which prompted the men of that age to discover a form of unimaginable beauty in the tomb of the classic world."

Many other types of cryptic legends might be enumerated, but enough have been cited to show their peculiar character and significance. They fill the treasure houses of fable in which the minds of men delight to wander and whether it be the story of Gyges and his ring which Plato tells, or that of Aladdin and his lamp in the "Thousand Nights," they are all one and the same,—the discovery of some miraculous object long hidden which brings great good fortune to the finder.

There is nothing which will sooner or more easily enlist our sympathies than the story of some loss and the search for its recovery: and there is no more powerful method of impressing a truth or moral than by a tale of this description. Thus it is that the parables which are loved the most and told oftenest are those of the "Lost Piece of Silver," the "Lost Sheep," and the "Prodigal Son."

And if no more powerful method of impressing a truth or moral exists than this, there is also no more powerful method of promulgating an untruth or a fraud. Stories of the finding of the hidden relics of saints fill the annals of the Christian Church, and the tales of their wonder-working cures have enabled a deceitful priesthood to exert a most pernicious influence over the minds of the ignorant.

We may therefore commend the rule which Plato lays down for the guardians of his Republic when he says: "We must first of all preside over the fable-makers, that the legends which are beautiful and good may be chosen, and those that are otherwise, rejected."