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Philip Carrington

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THE PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN CATECHISM

A Study in the Epistles

BY

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1940

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107448223

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First published 1940

First paperback edition 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-44822-3 Paperback

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To
MY FATHER

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P R E F A C E

The author was prevented from carrying these studies any further by becoming Bishop of the great missionary Diocese of Quebec with its two hundred and eighty thousand square miles of territory. He has, however, been urged to publish his researches and conclusions, even though in many respects they have not been fully worked out. This procedure has involved a restriction of scope which is probably beneficial, though it has precluded a detailed study of the texts in the light of the general thesis, or a full study of the allied literature whether Jewish or Christian.

In the case of late Hebrew, he must confess that he is not equipped to make a first-hand investigation, and has had to rely on English and German literature which often leaves much to be desired. He has not been able, for instance, to find a translation of *Sifra* to Leviticus into a modern language, or any critical discussion or commentary on it. When one considers that Leviticus was the first reader used in Jewish education, and that *Sifra* sheds light on how it was understood in the second, and probably the first, century A.D., it will be realised how far we are yet from a true appreciation of the cultural background of the Jewish Christianity which gave birth to the religion of the New Testament. An attempt has, however, been made in Chapter I to indicate some features of the traditional mode of education in what I have called the 'old piety'. Chapter II deals with the introduction of the proselyte into the circle of levitical Judaism, and suggests that there are clear traces in the New Testament that this procedure has influenced the earliest Christian mission in its handling of gentile converts, thereby producing formulae which may be described as neo-levitical.

Chapter III takes one or two passages from I Peter which have been explained as borrowings from the Pauline epistles,

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and argues that this explanation is unlikely. They are best explained as traditional catechetical material of Jewish character, used independently by each writer. This forms the starting-point of the New Testament investigation.

Chapter iv deals with other formulae which are common to all three authors. Four points common to Ephesians (Colossians), I Peter, and James form the basis of the study; as they tend to occur in the same order, at the same logical position, and with the same effect, it is thought justifiable to allude to them as a pattern. The passages which form this pattern are, it is contended, of a catechetical nature, and are connected with baptism. Chapter v deals with the vocabulary of the pattern, which is held to be more characteristic of catechetical documents than of the New Testament writers who preserve it. Chapter vi treats of the thought sequence of the pattern when isolated from the documents which contain it.

The reader may regard some of the evidence as slight and inconclusive; but the fact remains that the resemblances do exist, and that they tend to occur in the same order. The four points are no more than a basis for study; the reader who rejects the significance of one or more of them will himself find others (to which I also allude) which may impress him more. The total range of resemblances calls for some explanation; the theory of literary borrowing from the Pauline writing is inadmissible; in some shape or form the theory of a common pattern or storehouse of catechetical material seems bound to take its place. It is hoped that the thesis advanced in this little book may have some value as a preliminary exploration in the work of discussing the common pattern.

It may be added that the minor resemblances call for as careful study as the major resemblances, and may, when understood, prove equally illuminating. Unless all are dismissed as coincidence (which I cannot conceive possible), all must be equally taken into consideration.

Assuming the truth of the theory which has been advanced, I go on, in Chapter vii, to indicate some respects in which

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PREFACE

apostolic and post-apostolic Christianity developed on the same lines as rabbinic Judaism. Chapter VIII attempts to show how the four epistles fit into such a system. Chapter IX returns to the pattern and expounds it (with some use of conjecture) as a baptismal ritual, or as a series of didactic formulae connected with the baptismal rite.

The true test of a theory of this kind is subsequent to the establishment of its probability by detailed examination of textual evidence. It lies in the way in which it illuminates the situation as a whole, especially problems which had not been taken into account in evolving the theory.

One such problem, in this case, is the high importance of the epistles in the early canon. The nature of apostolic Christianity was not such as to account for this on purely literary grounds; but if the epistles were the principal authoritative transcripts of the kind of oral teaching which was employed in the catechetical instruction of converts, we can understand at once their vital importance, and the pre-eminent position which they occupy in the mind of such a writer as St Polycarp.

Similarly the use of the epistle as a mode of authoritative intervention by an apostolic *tannā* (teacher) in an actual ecclesiastical situation is clearly carried on into the sub-apostolic age, till the period when the accepted epistles begin to be thought of as Scripture in their own right possessing a primary value as sacred literature. In the subapostolic age letters from St Clement, St Ignatius, or St Polycarp still have something of the effect of a letter from St Paul, St Peter, or St John (even though it may be disclaimed).

Again, the idea of a 'tannaite' succession of elders, as in contemporary Judaism, adds something to our understanding of the growth of what is called apostolic succession.

Another important point is concerned with the origin of the rites of catholic baptism which have been attributed by various scholars to Mandaean sources, mystery religions, or other pagan influences. If the conjectural exposition of the apostolic

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pattern attempted in Chapter IX is admitted to have any validity, we begin to see the possibility of an apostolic baptismal rite which could be the ancestor of the historical catholic rite, and yet trace its own ancestry to Jewish practice. It must be owned that such a process of continuous development is more acceptable than the violent discontinuity demanded by some present-day theories.

The author desires to express his thanks to his friends the Rev. F. C. Grant, late Dean of the Seabury-Western Seminary, Evanston, Illinois, and now professor in the Union Theological Seminary, New York, and the Rev. A. H. Forster, Librarian of the Hibbard Old Testament Library, who read the MS. of this book in a much more extended form; to the Rev. B. S. Easton for sympathy and encouragement, and for library facilities at the General Theological Seminary, New York; also to the Rev. Kenneth Naylor of the Diocesan College, Montreal, for assistance and encouragement, especially in the later stages of production.

PHILIP QUEBEC

Easter 1938

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