

Primitive Christianity and Its Non-Jewish Sources  
Carl Clemen  
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Professor Clemen is the Baedeker in the field of modern theological controversy. In the October number for 1912 we noticed his *Der geschichtliche Jesus*, a brochure furnishing an excellent introduction to the contemporary debate about the historicity of Jesus. The present work renders a similar and equally valuable service with regard to the wider and somewhat older issues raised by the *religionsgeschichtliche* interpretation of Christianity and the New Testament. In its German form the book appeared in 1909 under the title *Religionsgeschichtliche Erklärung des Neuen Testaments*. The English translation now offered to the public has been revised by the author himself, and the reader is assured in the preface that in every respect it truthfully represents his meaning. It has besides this, as Dr. Clemen generously concedes, the unusual bent of reading better than the original. This judgment is verified by the comparison we have made of the two. The cases where the German may be consulted to advantage in clearing up obscurities of the English are few in number compared with the cases where the opposite procedure will be found helpful.

After an introduction in which the history of the religious-historical interpretation is traced from Celsus down to Drews and Jensen, and in which the methodological principles for instituting the inquiry are carefully laid down, the author deals successively with the two rubrics of the leading ideas of Christianity in general and the individual types of teaching (Jesus—Paul—the Johannine writings) in particular. The former rubric is subdivided into three sections treating of the ideas inherited from Judaism, the New Ideas of Christianity and the Institutions of Primitive Christianity. What precedes the discussion of these three subdivisions is a chapter of considerable length entitled Christian thought in some of its more general aspects. This title is a misnomer, for the chapter is entirely devoted to the consideration of concrete resemblances in thought or expression between the New Testament and the contemporaneous Hellenistic literature. Owing to the barrenness of results this part of the book is apt to have a wearying effect upon the reader. The author arrives in nearly every instance at the negative verdict of “not proven.” In the subsequent discussion things become more interesting. While the author keeps to the end strictly within the role of a referee, who weighs and judges, but offers no new suggestions of his own, and while within this role his attitude remains one of great caution and impatience with the extravaganzas of the more notorious representatives of the school, there nevertheless appear many points where he concedes the probability of foreign influence. Under the head of the leading ideas inherited from Judaism, the writer rejects the derivation of the Monotheism of the Old Testament from Babylonia, and likewise that of Parsistic influence. The seven angels, and eyes, and stars of Ezekiel and Zechariah and the Apocalypse are derived from the seven planets, but it is emphasized that the writer of the Apocalypse has no perception any more of this original meaning. Dr. Clemen also admits that the names of the Archangels are not explainable from this theory. The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures of the Apocalypse are likewise originally stars. The author’s sober sense reasserts itself in his refusal to associate the twelve Apostles with the signs of the zodiac. Neither has the “Lamb” anything to do with the constellation Aries. A sort of half-way position is taken in regard to the *στοιχεῖα*: the Stars meant by this term are conceived as animated bodies, but they are not as such brought into connection with the angels and no fatalistic astrological influence is attributed to them. Satan is explainable not from Babylonia but (at least ill part) from Mazdeism. Even the Spirit of God is represented as possibly in

its origin a Parsistic conception. Equally interesting is the discussion of the foreign provenience of Christianity's eschatological inheritance from Judaism. Here Clemen goes with the Graf-Wellhausen school. He rejects Gunkel's and Gressman's views about an ancient, pre-prophetic cosmological and universalistic eschatology in Israel and particularly the assumption that this eschatology was the popular belief of the early period, adopted and afterwards revived by the prophets. None the less at a later stage Rahab and the dragon, and the beasts of the Apocalypse were derived from the Chaos-monster. The explanation of the repetition of this mythological conflict in the future, and in general the development of the whole idea of eschatology in the minds of the Babylonian astrologers from the precession of the equinoxes is not endorsed. For this a possible derivation of the idea of eschatological recurrence from Mazdeism is substituted. Gog is not a mythological conception (against Gressman). The identification of Satan with the Dragon is due to Parsism. The belief that nature-phenomena are precursors of the end is not traceable to any foreign source. Neither can the personal precursors of the Messiah be so explained. The Messianic idea is not of foreign origin. The argument against Gressman on this point is staked on the un-Messianic interpretation of Isa. 7 and on the treatment of Micah 5:2 as a late interpolation based on the misunderstanding of Isa. 7 as a Messianic prophecy. The prophets know nothing of a mother of the Messiah. The ancient myth of a Redeemer-king born of a virgin exists only in the imagination of Jeremias. Isa. 9 and 11 are not based on the idea of a return of the golden age. The Messiah is no more than the King of the last days, and he is looked forward to on no other principle than that there will be a restoration of the earlier power of Israel. Once more Gressman's interpretation of Isa. 53 is rejected on the grounds chiefly that the servant is not an individual, and that the sacrificial, expiatory character of his death is lacking in the myths of Adonis, and Attis and in the account of the righteous servant from the text of Assurbanipal's library. Gunkel's assertion that there even existed in Jewish belief a myth which ascribed death and resurrection to the Messiah is declared unfounded.

The author's preference, shared by him with Bousset, for Mazdeism as the chief foreign source of New Testament eschatological ideas clearly reveals itself in his discussion of the Son-of-Man problem. The idea is traced back to that of the Persian "heavenly man." Although Paul in 1 Cor. 15:45 ff. polemizes against the idea so far as the priority in sequence of the heavenly man with regard to the earthly man is concerned, he is nevertheless said to have appropriated the substance of the idea in his doctrine of Christ as "the man from heaven." Clemen also explains from this source the *μορφή θεου* of Phil. 2, for of this Persian "heavenly man" it is said that he was in the form of God. In the same context the *μορφή δούλου* is interpreted on the basis of the Poimandres, where the primal man is represented as becoming *εναρμονιος δούλος*, i.e. enslaved to the Heimarmene. The author is, however, careful to emphasize that all this does not carry an idea of pagan provenience into the core of the official consciousness of Jesus, because the function of judging the world was not originally inherent in the idea of the heavenly man, but was extraneously added to it in Judaism, and by Jesus Himself.

The expectation of a life after death both in its immortality and in its resurrection form is held to have had no antecedents in Babylonia. While in part indigenious to the development of Old Testament religion in the direction of spiritualizing and individualism, it also underwent a perceptible influence from Parsism.

The observation may be made on the basis of the foregoing that Dr. Clemen's reserve towards

accepting the religious-historical explanations has something to do with his theological position as an adherent of the “liberal” views. He follows the “liberal” tradition of exegesis within the Old Testament, which may not unjustly be characterized as minimizing the supernatural and preferring wherever possible to rationalize the mental processes of the writers. Over against this the *religionsgeschichtler* have a positive liking for realism of interpretation and for emphasizing the magical irrational aspects of religious conceptions. It is plain that the former attitude more easily lends itself to the explanation of acts on the principle of indigenous rational development, whereas the latter more naturally exploits the disconnectedness of the irrational in favor of its hypothesis of foreign derivation. If Dr. Clemen’s exegesis had been more realistic, the instances in which he admits that ideas are borrowed would have doubtless been more numerous. In the matter of interpretation e.g. of the Messianic texts we cannot help feeling that Gunkel and Gressman are more nearly right. If from the mysterious and disconnected character of such material we on our part do not draw the inference that it is derived from Babylon or Persia, this is simply due to the fact that we reckon with a solid supernaturalism. But on the standpoint of Clemen, who does not do this, a movement away from the “liberal” exegetical tradition would inevitably lead to acceptance of the religious-historical conclusions on a much larger scale.

The same observation might be made with regard to the author’s treatment of the specifically Christian ideas and institutions. Here his attitude is even more reserved and negative than where the Jewish inheritance is concerned. This is the natural result of the reflection that the primitive Christian church was much less open to direct influence from pagan sources than Judaism had been in its longer history: The canon accordingly results, that to prove influence it will be necessary in such cases to point out its working in the Jewish antecedents of Christianity, and with regard to the specifically Christian ideas this cannot be done. The author makes frequent and sound use of this canon. Nevertheless here also, we believe that from his un-supernaturalistic standpoint a less “liberally” colored exegesis would have rendered him more receptive to the views of the other party. As it is he makes concession only at isolated points, and that largely in formal respects. His criticism of the Gilgamesh theory is searching and conclusive. He has no use for the derivation of the passion and resurrection story from an Adonis or Attis or any other myth. The Sacaea cannot have given rise to the account of Jesus’ maltreatment. The explanation of a large part of Paulinism from the mystery-religions finds no favor in his eyes. At the utmost the form of expression and in no wise the substance has been influenced from this source. A somewhat peculiar position is taken with regard to the virgin-birth. The theories or origination of the idea from Isa. 7, of Babylonian, North-Arabian, Persian, Indian and Greek origin are alike rejected. On the other hand Clemen does not believe that the idea is founded on fact. In his discussion of the Lucan narrative he employs the usual arguments to show that it was not originally inherent in the tradition, but subsequently added to it. How then does he account for its rise? He suggests that it may have sprung from a view previously current in Jewish circles that the patriarchs were supernaturally begotten of God without a human father through a virgin-birth. And this idea, he thinks, could easily have been developed out of the older notion, vouched for by Paul, that Isaac was born after the Spirit, i.e. that there was a supernatural factor involved in his procreation. The sole support for this theory is the allegorizing statement of Philo to the effect, that, where the patriarchs represent virtues in the Old Testament narrative, they are not introduced as “knowing” women. In spite of Conybeare and Badham, there is nothing in Philo’s statement to indicate, that his allegorizing fancy has at this point a solid basis of Jewish realistic belief. But the theory is interesting because it brings the virgin-birth into connection

with the idea, that in our opinion, is actually embodied in it as a fact, viz., the necessity of the direct supernatural origin of the human nature of the Savior, so far as this was possible within the terms of His office. If Dr. Clemen will translate his theory out of the sphere of ideas into the sphere of history, we are prepared to accept it.

The general conclusion at which the author arrives at the end in his retrospect at the discussion, needs a word of comment. It sounds comparatively reassuring to hear him declare that “if we leave external matters definitely on one side, the New Testament ideas that are perhaps derived from non-Jewish sources—for we may emphasize once more the hypothetical nature of most of our results—lie mainly on the fringe of Christianity, and do not touch its vital essence.” But it should not be forgotten that the reassuring import of such a statement with its comforting distinction between “fringe” and “essence” is wholly dependent on the theological standpoint from which it is made and received. Dr. Clemen is a “liberal” theologian, and he distributes the contents of the New Testament as to essence and form in accordance with his liberal interpretation of what Christianity means. The historic faith of the church has always counted among the essence not a few things which “liberalism” declares purely formal. Insofar as certain of these things are declared by Dr. Clemen of pagan origin, it is small comfort for us to know, that to his “liberal” point of view they appear of a formal nature. The reassurance that we need regards, not the liberal but the orthodox interpretation of what constitutes the essence of Christianity. Conservatives have no occasion to infer from Dr. Clemen’s book that the danger from the religious-historical interpretation of the New Testament is purely imaginary.

Of errata in the English text, partly occurring also in the original German, we note the following, p. 52 Mt. 8:22 ff. for 23 ff.; p. 57 Lk. 4:28 for 23; p. 69 in the quotation from Epictetus *τοῦτο* for *τοῦτο*; *המשבח* on p. 129 should have no Dagesh in the *ש*.

The translation is uniformly accurate. Only on p. 86 the rendering “this representation” would have better given the sense of the original than “all such reasoning.” On p. 97, line 14 the “*zugleich*” of the original is neglected in the translation. On p. 368, last paragraph, “of course” should be “to be sure.”