THE ORIGIN OF THE RECENTLY DISCOVERED

APOCRYPHON JACOBI*

The origin and early growth of Christianity in Egypt are still wrapped in darkness. It is most remarkable, that neither that invaluable source of information, the Acts of the Apostles, nor the NT in general yields any positive evidence which can be connected with certainty with Egypt. This is the more striking since this country is so near to Palestine and offered a place of residence to large Jewish colonies. This unfortunate situation does not change for the greater part of the second century. Thirty years ago von Harnack had to confess: „Die empfindlichste Lücke in unserem Wissen von der ältesten Kirchengeschichte ist unsere fast vollständige Unkenntnis der Geschichte des Christentums in Alexandrien und Aegypten … bis zum Jahre c. 180 (Episkopat des Demetrius). Erst für diese Zeit tritt für uns die alexandrinische Kirche in das Licht der Geschichte”\(^1\). Some names of apocryphal gospels like the Gospel according to the Hebrews and according to the Egyptians are known; the famous Gnostic leaders Basilides and Valentinus lived there; some evidence of the existence of Christianity is offered by papyri, though the survey of H. I. Bell in 1944\(^2\) did not show a rich harvest for the period which interests us at the moment. The question whether Barnabas was written in Egypt is still open and the suggestion of a few scholars that 2 Clement had his home on the borders of the Nile was not favourably received\(^3\). Eusebius was ill-informed about that time and the great Alexandrians who were so much nearer are practically silent. According to Walter Bauer in his Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei this was on purpose: „bis tief ins 2. Jahrhundert ist das Christentum hier ausgesprochen unorthodox”\(^4\). This contention has lately been challenged by Prof. Turner in The Pattern of Christian Truth who while conceding that “the full pattern of orthodoxy develop(ed) somewhat late”, holds that “a certain shading off into heresy” exists only on “the outer-fringes of Churchlife”\(^5\). I wish we could speak about this matter with so much certainty, but in my opinion the scanty survivals of Egyptian Christendom, often even of extremely doubtful interpretation and setting, do not allow a decision either way.

Especially because of the great part Egypt played in the development of Christian Gnosticism in the prime both of the heretical schools of Basilides and Valentinus and of the ecclesiastical writers like Clement and Origen, it is deeply to be regretted that up till now so little evidence is available. But it may be that one day or another, perhaps in the near future, that inexhaustible store-house Egypt will suddenly provide the
materials to solve the present riddle. I do not dare to say that this happy
day has dawned yet, but we may be thankful that something more has
become available in recent years. And though it does not offer historical
data which can only fully clear the matter and though in many respects
the number of puzzles has increased, it should be borne in mind that
every new piece of evidence is highly valuable, because in one way or
another it covers a blank space of the immense jig-saw puzzle, and
therefore requires careful examination.

Since Prof. H. C. Puech will fully discuss the importance of the library
of a Gnostic sect, discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi and especially of
the "Codex Jung" which formed part of it, it is superfluous for me to
dwell upon this theme. Instead of showing the more general aspects of the
subject which may better be left to so competent a scholar as Prof. Puech,
I propose to pay somewhat closer attention to one particular point, viz.
the hitherto unknown apocryphal writing attributed to James which
forms the first part of "Codex Jung" the only one of the group which is
accessible at present thanks to the work of my colleague Dr. Quispel.

Since this Apocryphon Jacobi belongs to a manuscript with material from
genuine Gnostic sources, the presumption that it has the same origin,
viz. in the school of Valentinus, does not seem too hazardous. It is, as I
pointed out in my study: "The Gospel of Truth and the NT."\(^6\), beyond
reasonable doubt that the second treatise is the Evangelium Veritatis of the
great gnostic doctor mentioned by Irenaeus, and the great part of the
fourth treatise, called by the editors On the three natures, shows so many
affinities with the teaching of Heracleon, the pupil of Valentinus that
there is a good case to be made out for its deriving from the same school.
But is this presumption right for the first part? It is interesting to notice
that Puech and Quispel in their first detailed report\(^7\) assign this
Apocryphon Jacobi to a Gnostic author only with great hesitation. This
raises an important question with regard to the character of Egyptian
Christianity mentioned before.

Granted that the distinction between "Church and Gnosis" in the ear-
ly part and middle of the second century cannot be too well defined it
may be asked whether this document—if it is old—shows definite marks
of Gnosticism or not; what are its character and affinities? And though I
admit that many phrases in this Apocryphon are even harder to under-
stand than the letters of our beloved brother Paul (cf. 2 Pet. 3:16), it is
possible, I think, to attain a fairly sound result in the main point at issue.

The train of thought in this apocryphon is not quite as clear as we should
wish. The contents may be summarized in this way. After a short
introduction in which the author says that he James and Peter are called
by the Lord 550 days after His resurrection for a special instruction he