THE NEWLY DISCOVERED GnostIC EPIStLE TO RHEGINOS ON THE RESURRECTION

I

It is my great privilege and pleasure to direct your attention to and to discuss with you in these lectures a new, hitherto completely unknown Christian text, probably dating from the second century, Gnostic in origin and contents, dealing with the great and important doctrine of the Resurrection.

The choice of this subject was prompted by various reasons. The first reason lies in the fact that a new discovery hardly fails to attract attention and that it is a joy for a lecturer to guide his audience to an area which has only quite recently been disclosed. This general psychological factor is also at work in the field of early Christian studies. Everyone of you will be more or less familiar with the great and unexpected discovery made at Nag Hammadi (Upper Egypt) in 1945 by which an extensive library of Gnostic books, by far the greater part unknown, came into our hands. That mysterious phenomenon, called "Gnosis" or "Gnosticism", up till then known almost exclusively from the information furnished by its opponents or by rather late sources, has now come to light in works written by the Gnostics themselves. The first announcements of this discovery gave rise to great expectations. Various causes have contributed to the delay in the publication of these treasures, in particular the fact that these books are not preserved in the original Greek, but in Coptic translations and the extremely difficult character of their contents. But, thanks to various scholars in different countries the doors have been opened and gradually the texts of the Apocryphon of John, the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel according to Thomas and the Gospel according to Philip have become available. The year 1963 was particularly fruitful: Drs. Böhlig and Labib published two texts, Drs. Labib and Krause edited the Apocryphon of John in the three recensions that have come down to us in this library and Drs. Puech and Quispel, with the assistance of a group of other scholars, gave us another part of the Jung-Codex. This last item we shall inspect somewhat more closely. But even from this short summary it becomes clear that there is no longer any cause for complaint and that there is a good deal of work to be done, because after the publication comes the interpretation and evaluation, and here we are still at the very beginning. In this way we shall get fresh insights into the true character and development of Gnosticism.
Secondly, this subject is of interest for the burning question of the relation between "Gnosis and New Testament". The older view about Gnosis regarded it as a Christian heresy, as was still held by such a great scholar as Burkitt. This was in line with the conception of the Church Fathers. As a matter of fact, the Christian Church had to fight a great struggle with the Gnostic schools, such as those of Basilides and Valentinus in the second century and with western Manichaeism in the fourth century, both of which tried to give a reinterpretation of the Christian message. But a deeper insight into the religious world of the Roman imperial period, won by the great efforts of the "Religionsgeschichtliche Schule", by great scholars like Reitzenstein, Bousset and others, revealed that this "heretical" aspect was only one side of the picture, that Gnosticism was a religious movement which had a life of its own and that it existed also outside the precincts of the Church. What was its origin, where and when did it begin? For many scholars, especially in Germany, it is beyond any doubt that Gnosticism had a pre-Christian origin and that many writers in the NT, mainly St. Paul and St. John, strongly reacted against it. It goes without saying that this conception largely affects the interpretation of the NT and may be regarded as one of the burning points at issue. Of course, this question cannot easily be decided and we must take into account that Gnosticism itself had a development of its own. Hence, in discussing the various documents we must try to define its exact relation to the NT.

A third reason which led us to our subject was the fact that the document we are dealing with dates from the second century. That period from the end of the apostolic age to, roughly speaking, the time of St. Irenaeus was extremely important for the history of Christianity. The young plant of the new faith was destined to flower in the hard outside world, spontaneously, but unprotected. Would its blossom be destroyed by the adverse winds, the heat of persecution, the coldness of unbelief? Would Christianity be changed in character when it sought to win the world for Christ and had to find its home there? This important age in which such great issues were at stake, is still unknown in many ways. Later ages which had to grapple with other questions were not interested in this early development. Much of it was forgotten. You will know that the important writings of the Apologists were preserved quite by chance because of the antiquarian interests of a bishop in the ninth century; it is only due to his alertness that we still possess Justin Martyr, Athenagoras and Tatian. Recently we have had complaints from two scholars about this lack of sources for the second century. I would not go so far as they do. The magnificent work of previous generations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has unearthed much new material, the only difficulty