THE ASIAN CONTEXT OF THE NEW PROPHECY
AND OF EPISTULA APOSTOLORUM

BY

A. STEWART-SYKES

1 Introduction

The provenance of Epistula Apostolorum is disputed, but there has been relatively little progress since the classic positions were set out in the early years of this century by Schmidt, who favoured an Asian provenance,1 and Bardy and Lietzmann who favoured Alexandria as a place of redaction.2 Subsequent treatments of the subject have not added anything significant to the argument.3 The most recent full-length study of Epistula Apostolorum avoids the issue altogether.4 The aim of this article is to defend the Asian provenance of the Epistula by noting significant parallels between it and other Asian Christian groups, and in particular the Montanists.

We begin however with a review of the main arguments to date.

2.1 Arguments for and against an Asian Provenance

Schmidt’s main arguments for an Asian provenance for Epistula Apostolorum are its strong links with the fourth Gospel and the fact that Cerinthus is the arch-heretic named.5 He also suggests that the particular gnostic tenets with which Epistula Apostolorum takes issue are the denial of the resurrection

2 Gustav Bardy, in an untitled review of Schmidt in RB 30 (1921) 110-134; H. Lietzmann “Epistula Apostolorum” (Review) ZNW 20 (1921) 173-176.
5 Schmidt, Gespräche Jesu 364-367.
417

of Christ and docetism. This takes us to Asia since these are the very problems combated by Ignatius in his letters to Asian congregations. Finally he believes that the section concerning the Pascha, which he believes to indicate a Quartodeciman background, fits an Asian milieu.

Against Schmidt the following arguments may be noted. On the question of the Johannine links Hornschuh suggests that since the fourth Gospel may be Alexandrian then on this basis Alexandria is at least as likely a place for the redaction of Epistula Apostolorum; if this is the case Cerinthus may simply have been chosen as a representative heretic who was historically known. Schmidt himself at one point in his work implies this, in suggesting that the fiction of the apostolic opposition to gnosticism obliged the redactor to name heretics of the apostolic period, namely Simon and Cerinthus. On the question of docetism, it is sufficient to note that this belief is not restricted to Asia. Finally, with regard to the Pascha it is to be noted that no date for the Pascha is cited by the Epistula Apostolorum, and so the work cannot on this basis alone be claimed as Quartodeciman and therefore Asian.

It is possible to defend Schmidt principally with regard to his location of Epistula Apostolorum in Asia on the basis of the links with the fourth Gospel and on the basis of the prominent role of Cerinthus.

In respect of attempts to locate the fourth Gospel at Alexandria one should note that at the beginning of the third century Clement, for all his admiration of John shows no knowledge of a connection of John and Alexandria whereas extensive evidence of a connection with Ephesus is collected by Schmidt, just as it has most recently been thoroughly reviewed.