

The Background of the Epistle of Clement of Rome

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In view of recent theories as to the origin of Christianity and the way in which the New Testament was compiled, the study of the presuppositions of a book, written in the name of one famous Church to which an Apostle sent one of his most important Epistles and in which he lived and died, to another famous Church, which he founded and taught and to which he addressed two Epistles, must certainly be important. This book is the Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Church of Corinth.

Of its author we know very little. According to an ancient tradition he was Bishop of Rome,¹ and was appointed to that office by St. Peter. In the second century he was considered sufficiently important to have certain legends attached to his name and certain homilies attributed to him which are certainly spurious, and, at a later date, a fantastic legend was told of the manner of his death. A church dedicated to him, said to have been built over his house, still exists in Rome, and his name is commemorated in the Canon of the Mass in which so few saints of the Roman Church before the persecution of Diocletian appear.

Yet, whether it be for reasons of humility, or for some other cause, he writes, not in his own name, but in that of the Roman Church, and persuades and admonishes rather than commands. There is no trace in his letter of any threat of excommunication to an offending Church, still less any assumption of infallibility.

Clement may have been a freedman of T. Flavius Clemens, a cousin of Domitian who was put to death in A.D. 95, the year after his consulship, because he was a Christian, and whose wife, Flavia Domitilla, also a Christian, was banished because of her faith. Their children, who had been chosen by Domitian as his successors, disappear from history, and probably shared the fate of their father. A cemetery which Flavia Domitilla constructed on her own property as a place of Christian burial for herself and her friends is still to be seen in Rome, and its

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decorations show that it was undoubtedly constructed in the first century.

Clement wrote in Hellenistic Greek. The extent of his acquaintance with the Greek Old Testament makes it probable that he was a Jew of the dispersion or a Jewish proselyte before he became a Christian. His Roman name is no disproof of this, for freedmen often took the names of their masters. He did not allow his acquaintance with the Septuagint or with the Greek of the New Testament to influence his style unduly. He shows that he had read the First Epistle of Peter in several places, but when he wishes to say that the Christians are a "peculiar people", he does not use the phrase *λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν* but *λαὸς περιούσιος*² (64).

¹ On Clement's episcopate see J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* I. i (1890), pp. 63 ff., 201 ff. Irenaeus (*Haer.* iii. 3. 3) makes Clement third bishop of Rome after the apostles, the first two being Linus and Anencletus.

² Cf. Tit. ii. 14.

It is important to keep in mind that the author of this Epistle wrote in the days of Domitian, which are described in such lurid terms by Tacitus and Juvenal, and that he was probably also personally acquainted with the days of Nero; that is to say, he lived in one of the most corrupt periods of human history, when not only every moral law was flouted in high quarters, but even free speech and learning were ruthlessly put down. During this *tempus saevitiae*, not only Christians, but also Jews were persecuted, and the conditions under which this author lived resembled closely the conditions prevailing in Hitler's Reich. These are not the conditions under which we should expect a book to be produced which inculcates a high morality and the spirit of universal love. But such this book is, and its production must be accounted for in some way or other.

We are often told now that Christianity is nothing but a syncretism of religious and moral ideas prevalent in the first century, and that the New Testament was gradually produced by a community or communities influenced in some way by the story of a somewhat original Galilæan peasant who was put to death on a charge of rebellion against the Roman power by the military governor of Judæa. That his followers taught a mystical doctrine as to the meaning of his life and the nature of his person is not denied, and it is admitted that they based on this teaching a motive for living in accordance with principles of morality different from and, in many respects, superior to those which had been recommended by moralists who lived before the beginning of the Christian era. Further, many are

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ready to admit that some of his followers succeeded in keeping the commandments which were attributed to him to an extent which excited notice among their neighbours, and induced many of them to forsake their ancestral beliefs, to adopt the new cult and even to lay down their lives rather than repudiate it. But the books from which this information is mainly gathered were written by his immediate followers, some of them, in the view of modern writers, eastern fanatics, credulous and ready to follow any man who claimed, in however enigmatical a way, to be the Messiah so long expected by the Jews. They are believed to have been seduced into accepting this difficult and, indeed, impracticable moral code by the fervent belief that it was merely an *Interimsethik* intended to apply only to the short period which they expected would intervene between the death of their Master and his triumphant return on the clouds of heaven to reward them with eternal felicity and to punish their enemies and oppressors.

In the Epistle of Clement we have the work of a man who was certainly not a fanatic, who never mentions the Second Advent as a motive for conduct, who was not one of the original followers of Jesus, but a convert and who, even if he was not a Roman, had lived in close contact with some of the highest and best educated members of the Roman imperial circle. In spite of the fact that a man like this must have known that he was risking his life by so doing, he became a Christian, and, in spite of the vileness of the society in which he lived, he recommended and, we cannot doubt, tried to exemplify in his own conduct the moral principles of the religion which he had adopted, even the most difficult and novel of them. These indisputable facts, set down incidentally and without any parade or thought of propaganda in a book the authorship and date of which are not disputed, need some better explanation than that the faith of Clement was the result of an ill understood glorification and perversion of the story of a Galilæan carpenter who had met a shameful end some sixty years before, and whose moral system was in no sense original, except so far as it was enforced upon his followers by his fanatical persuasion that he was the Messiah-elect and that he would

return, armed with all the power of God as the Messiah approved and sanctified by his voluntary death, during the period which was covered by the natural lives of some of those whom he taught.

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Clement knew the outlines of what afterwards became Christian doctrine. Christ came in humility (16); His blood was shed for the whole world (7); He rose from the dead (24); those who serve Him will rise again (26). "Jesus Christ gave His blood for us by the will of God, and His flesh for our flesh and His life for our lives" (49). He does not even shrink from speaking of the "suffering of God" (2), as in his day Patripassianism was no formulated heresy. Christ is the "High Priest of our offerings, the Guardian and Helper of our weakness" (36). There is even an adumbration of the doctrine of the Trinity in the way in which "One God, one Christ and one Spirit of grace" are mentioned together (46, cf. 58). The inspiration of the Old Testament by the Holy Spirit is taken for granted (13, 22, 45), and under this head the pre-existence of Christ is also presupposed (22).

But he does not dwell on these things, still less does he undertake to prove or explain them. They are simply common ground to himself and his readers. He does not seem to be aware of any distinction between "bishops" and "presbyters" (44), but he holds that certain persons were appointed by the Apostles that the offerings and ministrations might be performed with care, just as the Jews had High Priests and Priests whose duty it was to offer the proper services at the proper place. He knows of the doctrine of election and even speaks of "the number of the elect" (2, 59) but, again, he neither explains nor defends it and does not seem to be particularly interested in it. He refers to justification by faith casually in connection with Jacob and the priests and Levites, the rulers and kings of Judah who are descended from him, saying:

"They all therefore were glorified and magnified, not through themselves or their own works, or the righteous doing which they wrought, but through His will. And so we, having been called through His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified through ourselves, or through our own wisdom or understanding or piety or works which we wrought in holiness of heart, but through faith, whereby the Almighty God justified all men that have been from the beginning" (32).

The faith of Abraham is referred to in ch. 31, much in the same way as it is referred to in James ii. 21 and Heb. xi. 17) but in ch. 30 we are told that we are justified by works and not by words. The author certainly knew the Epistle to the Romans and comes very near to reproducing its language as far as the moral teaching of the later chapters are concerned, but he never

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quotes it *verbatim* and seems to have had little interest in the thorny doctrinal problems discussed in the first eleven chapters.

The only trace of pre-Christian and anti-Jewish thought to be found in the Epistle is to be found in ch. 19 where Clement writes: "Let us note how free from anger God is towards all His creatures."

If we are to judge from the contents of his Epistle, the thing that interested Clement most was morality, especially the efficacy of repentance, humility, self-forgetfulness and love. It may be thought that this is not surprising in an Epistle intended to bring peace to a Church which was distracted by schism. But many other virtues are dwelt on, such as hospitality, knowledge, endurance and purity. Respect of persons is condemned, men are exhorted to pray for their neighbours and to count their transgressions as their own. Lowliness is commended by the example of Christ (16): forbearance and longsuffering by His teaching (13), which is paraphrased thus:

"Have mercy, that ye may receive mercy; forgive, that it may be forgiven to you. As ye do, so shall it be done to you. As ye give, so shall it be given to you. As ye judge, so shall ye be judged. As ye show kindness, so shall kindness be shown to you. With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you."

St. Paul's simile of the necessity of all the members to the body is mentioned and expanded, but not quoted. Each man must be subject to his neighbour; the strong must not neglect the weak, and the weak must respect the strong. The rich must minister to the poor, and the poor must give thanks to God that He has given him someone by whom his wants may be supplied. Men must not bear testimony to their own virtues, but leave that task to others. If a man is pure in the flesh, he must not boast, "knowing that it is Another who bestows his continence upon him" (38).

These things are the commonplaces of Christian morality. But the important thing to be noticed is that they were anything but commonplaces in the first century, especially at the Imperial court. Men, says Clement, jeer and mock at us (39). They did more: they punished such conduct with death or banishment.

How did the condition of things which Clement so calmly takes for granted come to pass in such cities as Rome and Corinth? It is a poor explanation to say that it rose from the

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aspirations of the better people of the time and was, somewhat unreasonably, based in a religion which was really a compound of Eastern pre-Christian Gnosticism, Jewish Apocalyptic, Alexandrian allegorism and a faded amalgam of Platonic idealism and Stoic ethics, although the people who first taught this system of morality—and to a great extent embodied it in their lives—all attributed it to the teaching and example of a Galilaeen peasant prophet and to the efficacy of His death. In Him they had found, not only a perfect teacher, but also a new revelation of the nature of God which enabled them to live in a manner which was thoroughly repugnant even to the better thought of the time, as may be seen from the way in which Marcus Aurelius regarded Christianity. That such a system, enforced by such sanctions, should have arisen "spontaneously" in such a society is about as likely as that it should have arisen and found adherents in Germany in the last fifteen years. That when once it had arisen it did something to preserve, not only Germany, but also more favoured European nations from utter corruption is a fact that not many will care to deny. Many look to it as the only hope of a world which is fast settling back into a condition far more hopeless than that of the Roman Empire under Nero or Domitian. The Epistle of Clement shows it to us at work through the eyes of a worthy, but not brilliant member of the second generation of Christians, and it shows us what he was able to presuppose in his readers and what sort of arguments he believed would move them.

To him the Old Testament meant far more than the New, which, however much its teaching was valued, had not yet reached the dignity of holy and inspired Scripture. This is not to say that its content was indifferent to him. The whole of his argument is ultimately based on his faith in the love of God as revealed in Christ, and there is little doubt that if he had known the words of St. John, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another", he would have quoted them and made them his own.

These words were probably not then written. But the spirit of St. John is in the Epistle of Clement, if his words are not. The fact that Justin Martyr some fifty years later did not quote verbally from the Fourth Gospel, or name its author, is held by many to prove that he set little value on it. It is therefore worthy of more than passing notice that Clement, who revered

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and probably knew St. Paul, who made unmistakable use of the First Epistle of St. Peter and the Epistle to the Hebrews, and who expressly mentions the First Epistle to the Corinthians, never quotes the Epistle to the Romans, although he is certainly full of the spirit of its later chapters. To imagine that he did not know of it, or did not value it, because it was written, not by the Apostle Paul, but by another person of the same name, would plainly be absurd, but it is not as absurd as to suppose that Justin's failure to mention the Fourth Gospel *proves* that he did not know it, or did not value it. After all, Justin was writing for pagans or Jews, and Clement was writing for Christians.

To sum up, we find in the first non-canonical Christian writer a great reverence for the Old Testament, a firm grasp on the essentials of Christian doctrine, but no attempt to set it out at length, to explain it or to defend it; a deep sense of the value of Christian morality, combined with an earnest desire that members of another Church should walk worthily of their calling. That such a man should have lived in such a city at such a time and that he should have been the mouthpiece of a community like-minded with himself is a fact which demands explanation. The traditional account of the rise of Christianity gives a valid explanation of this fact. What other explanation really does so?

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