

The "Shepherd" of Hermas

H.P.V. Nunn

[p.109]

I

The *Shepherd* of Hermas is certainly the strangest book which has come down to us from the early days of the Church. If we can trust the account which the author gives of himself, it appears that he was born as a slave and sold to a Roman lady called Rhoda. Although he does not expressly say so, it seems that he was freed by this lady; he makes it plain that he was married and had a grown-up family at the time when he saw the first vision described in his book.

He says that he loved and respected his late mistress like a sister, and one day when he saw her bathing in the Tiber, the thought came into his mind that if he had a wife as beautiful and virtuous as she was, he would be happy. He is careful to insist that his thought did not go beyond this.

Some time afterwards, when he was going to Cumae and meditating on the glory of creation, he fell asleep and, in a vision, seemed to be in a broken and precipitous country. When he came out of this, he knelt down and confessed his sins and saw the lady whom he had desired greeting him out of heaven. She told him that she had been taken there to accuse him of his sins before the Lord. God was angry with him, because he had sinned against her. Hermas was naturally at a loss to know how he had done this. She told him that for a righteous man to entertain an evil desire was a great sin. He was to pray to God that this sin of which he had been guilty, the sins of all his house and the sins of the saints might be forgiven. Hermas began to wonder how he could propitiate God for his completed sins. He then saw an old woman with a book in her hand seated in a chair covered with white wool. She asked him why he, who was always patient, good-tempered and laughing, was now so sorrowful. Hermas replied that the reason for his grief was, "Because an excellent lady says that I have sinned against her".

The old woman, who was the Church, said, "By no means let this thing come upon the servant of God, but nevertheless it did come into your heart concerning her. It is such a thought

[p.110]

as this that brings sin on the servants of God. For it is an evil and mad thought against a reverend and tested spirit, if a man desire an evil deed, especially Hermas the temperate, the man who refrained from all evil desire and who was full of simplicity and great innocence". She went on to say that God was not angry with Hermas for this sin, but because he had not kept his family in order and had been too indulgent towards his children. God will have pity on him and his family, and make them strong, if he is not slothful and has courage and corrects them. She then reads to him at first terrible words which he cannot remember, and afterwards gentle words which he did remember. As she departs, she says that the terrible words are meant for the heathen and the apostates, but the gentle words for the righteous. Her last words are, "Hermas, play the man".

There is some slight resemblance between this book and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Both are visions; both deal with the forgiveness of sin, but in a very different way. Hermas on the whole seems very well satisfied with himself. Even the Church tells him that he is habitually patient, good-tempered, temperate and full of simplicity and great innocence. His sin is only great because it is the sin of a "righteous man". It can be forgiven simply by prayer to God, who will have pity on him. He is blamed for too great indulgence to his family, which had encouraged them in evil courses. There is not a trace of the utter abasement of Bunyan. There is no mention of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, or of the coming to the cross which makes Bunyan's burden fall from his back.

It is true that Hermas has an almost morbid sense of sin in one particular instance, but there is nothing distinctively Christian in all this, except a reminiscence of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, that an evil thought is in itself a sin. Yet in the second part of the vision he is told that this is not the sin which has made God angry with him, but his foolish indulgence of his children.

One of the strangest features of the book is that the vision with which it opens has not much connection with what follows, except in so far as the whole theme of the book is the possibility of forgiveness for post-baptismal sin.

Dr. Salmon in his article on Hermas in the *Dictionary of Christian Biography* pertinently suggests that the vision described

[p.111]

move may have been a real dream. Its lack of cohesion and its contradictions certainly resemble the conditions which are often reserved in dreams. In the later part of the book Hermas represents himself as praying for visions and being granted them. His whole pose is that of a man who is stupid, but anxious to learn. He continually asks the meaning of his visions to be examined to him and is often rebuked for his dullness and curiosity.

Hermas is said in the *Muratorian Fragment* to have been the brother of Pius, Bishop of Rome, and to have written his book only a short time before the publication of the *Fragment*, but many scholars regard this statement as incorrect. They found their opinion on the primitive nature of the theology of the *Shepherd* and on the reference which is made to Clement, who is to be commanded to impart the teaching of the book to other Churches. It seems probable that the man here referred to is the Clement who wrote the letter to the Corinthians and who, if not Bishop of Rome in the later sense of the term, was certainly the foreign correspondent of the Roman Church. If this opinion is true, the date of the *Shepherd* would be towards the end of the first century. If the statement in the *Muratorian Fragment* is accepted, it must have been written some time in the first half of the second century.

The earlier date fits in better with the fact that this strange book was almost treated as canonical by some Churches. People even revered its statements to such an extent that, as Tertullian tells us (*De Oratione*, xvi), some of them sat down after prayer, because it was recorded that Hermas did this, and his example was considered to be so important that this ritual was thought to be a matter of obligation. In his Montanist days, Tertullian had the worst possible opinion of the book, on account of its teaching as to the possibility of

the forgiveness of post-baptismal sin, and even went so far as to call it "The *Shepherd* of the adulterers".

The teaching of the second vision, in which the Church gives Hermas a book to copy, is that the sins of the saints will be forgiven "up to this day, if they repent with their whole heart". But those who sin after the appointed day shall find no salvation, "for the repentance for the just has an end. The days of repentance have been fulfilled for all the saints, but for the heathen repentance is open until the last day". Those

[p.112]

who deny their Christ in the coming persecution have no forgiveness, but those who denied Him in time past have obtained forgiveness by the mercy of God. Hermas is to bear no grudge against his family for their sins. He himself is saved because he has not departed from the living God and by his simplicity and temperance. Those who "do righteousness" shall not perish for ever. Where this teaching, which may almost be said to be contrary to Christianity, came from is not obvious. There is a slight echo of Hebrews iii. 12.

This is the teaching which Hermas is commanded to impart to Clement, that he may send it to other Churches, as is his duty, and to Grapte that she may exhort the widows and orphans. Hermas himself is to read it in Rome with the elders who are in charge of the Church. There is no mention of a Bishop, unless Clement is to be regarded as occupying that position.

In the same vision it is explained to Hermas that the old woman whom he saw is not the Sibyl, as he had supposed, but the Church. She appears old, because she was created the first of all things, and for her sake the world was established. This is almost the first trace of Christian teaching in the book, except a casual reference to Christ. In the paintings of the Catacombs the Church is represented as a woman, either praying or holding a scroll. How far this is due to the teaching of Hermas, or how far Hermas was inspired by a symbol already in existence, it is impossible to decide.

Hermas obtains more visions by fasting and prayer. The next time he sees the Church, she bids him sit with her on a couch. He wishes to sit on her right hand, but is told that he is not worthy of this place which is reserved for those who have suffered "for the Name". This is a link, but only a slight link, with New Testament ideas.

There is a reference to a persecution in which those who suffered for the Name endured stripes, imprisonments, crucifixions and wild beasts. This may well refer to the persecution of Nero, if the book was written in the first century, or to that of Domitian, if it was written in the second century.

Then follows the parable of the tower which is built with shining square stones. Many other stones are brought, some of which were suitable for the work and some of which were not. Those which were suitable were built into the tower;

[p.113]

the others were rejected. When Hermas presses the Church for an explanation, he is told that the tower is herself. It is built on the water, "because your life has been saved and shall be saved through water". The stones which are squared and fit into the tower are the Apostles

and Bishops and Teachers and Deacons and the righteous. The stones cast away are those who have sinned. Some of them wish to repent and will be built into the tower, if they repent while the tower is being built. If they repent after it is finished, they will only lie near the tower. Those who are cast away are the sinners. Some are utterly destroyed. Some are suitable stones, but are round. These must be cut and squared. These denote those whose wealth leads their souls astray. When their wealth is cut away they are fit to be built into the tower.

Hermas asks whether repentance is possible for any other sinners and is told that repentance is possible, but that such stones cannot be fitted into the tower. They will be fitted into another place, much less honourable, after they have been tormented and fulfilled the days of their sins. This is a curious anticipation of "the Roman doctrine of Purgatory", but the idea of a lower state of blessedness for those who have had to pass through Purgatory is not so definitely a doctrine which survived.

II

The second part of the book consists of a series of commands given to Hermas by a supernatural being who appears to him in the form of a Shepherd. It is from this Shepherd that the whole book takes its name. The Shepherd's not Christ, as might be expected from the number of representations of Him under this symbol which are found in the Catacombs, but the angel of repentance.

He comes to Hermas to instruct him and to help him in his conflict with sin. All through the book the sin of "double-mindedness" is repeatedly mentioned, which is an echo of a passage in the Epistle of James, and there are also traces of familiarity with other phrases occurring in this Epistle and in the First Epistle of Peter. In the commandments which the Shepherd gives to Hermas there are many similarities to the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, but no direct quotation from it. For example, he commanded to give to all without regard

[p.114]

to the worthiness of the recipient. Teaching about divorce which on the whole resembles that of Jesus is found in Commandment IV. Hermas is also charged to speak the truth. He is distressed by this command and makes the surprising confession that he has never spoken the truth in his life.

There are many references in this part of the book to a Holy Spirit that comes from God and that is grieved and oppressed by the sin of those into whose heart it enters. Although this resembles some of the teaching of the New Testament, it is far from being worthy of it, and farther still from the developed doctrine of the Church. For the Spirit is so far subordinate to God that it may beseech Him to allow it to depart from a man who has filled his soul with the spirit of evil. There are many references to the devil and to good and evil angels. Ill temper and grief are especially condemned as the work of evil agents and as likely to drive away "the angel of righteousness".

The question of the possibility of repentance for post-baptismal sin is again definitely raised, and the Shepherd tells Hermas that those who have been baptised in time past have one chance of effectual repentance, but apparently not more than one. The question of the lawfulness of a second marriage after the death of one of the partners to the first is also

raised, and such a marriage is declared not to be sinful, but those who refrain from it gain exceeding honour and great glory.

So far in the book there is a general approximation to the morality of the New Testament, hardly any verbal quotation from any part of it, and an almost complete absence of any such doctrinal framework as is to be found in the doctrines of the Incarnation or the Atonement or the Trinity, and no more trace of St. Paul's doctrine of Grace than is to be found in reference to the need of help from a Divine Spirit to enable a man to keep the commandments of God, which Hermas obviously regards as being very difficult to observe with anything like perfection.

He believes in the mercy of God, but is also persuaded that this mercy has very narrow limits in the case of those who have been baptised. Apparently he considered that it was open to any heathen to repent and be baptised, but that once this initiation had been undergone there was an obligation to lead a perfectly pure and holy life, with one possible chance of a second repentance which could not be repeated to any profit.

[p.115]

Such teaching can only be regarded as sub-Christian. It has affinities with some passages in the Epistle to the Hebrews, on which it may well have been founded, but it makes what is probably intended to refer to a particular case into a general rule.

III

The last part of the book contains a series of Similitudes or Parables which the Shepherd either relates or reveals to Hermas. They are often confused, are always told in excessive detail, and form a complete contrast to the Parables of the Gospels with their brevity and point.

The first is directed against those who acquire great possessions in this world. This shows that the Church did not consist wholly of slaves and poor people. Christians are advised to purchase "afflicted souls" rather than lands, and to care for the widow and orphan. At the same time it does not appear that they were commanded to sell the property "that they had received from God", but to use the revenue derived from it for the relief of the poor. This is enforced by the parable of the elm and the vine. The elm cannot bear fruit, but the vine can rest upon it and be made more fruitful by so doing. So the rich may rest upon the poor, who in their turn benefit the rich by their prayers. Such a doctrine is still characteristic of the Church of Rome and to some extent of other religious bodies, but it does not at all fit in with the modern idea of punitive taxation. The conclusion of the parable is: "Blessed are they who wealthy and understand that their riches are from the Lord, for he who understands this will also be able to do some good service."

Another parable begins with a dissertation on fasting and ends with one of the few excursions that Hermas makes into the field of dogmatic theology. The Shepherd finds Hermas fasting and asks why he is up so early. Hermas replies that he has a "station". The Shepherd, strangely enough, does not know what a "station" is. This seems to show that Hermas either knew Latin, or at any rate was acquainted with the technical Latin terms in use in the Roman Church, but did not expect the Shepherd to understand them.

A discussion on useless fasting follows. No fasting is of avail unless it does something for righteousness. True

[p.116]

fasting is the living of a pure life and the keeping of the commandments of God. If Hermas refrains from costly food, he must reckon how much he has saved and give the money to the poor. Then the fast will be written down to his credit.

This simple teaching is combined with a most confuses, parable. A certain man had a field and many servants. He planted a vineyard in a corner of his field and commanded a faithful servant to fence it in, but to do nothing more. As a reward for doing this he was to have his freedom. The servant fenced the vineyard, but perceived that it was full of weeds. He therefore weeded it thoroughly. When the master came back he was so pleased with what the servant had done that he called his beloved son and his friends and told them that he intended to make the servant his joint heir with his son. The son agreed to this decision. After a few days the master made a feast and sent the servant much food from the feast, but he only kept what was sufficient for himself, and gave the rest to his fellow servants. His fellow servants were glad and prayed that he might find still further favour with his master.

Hermas asks for an explanation of the parable. He is told that if he keeps the commandments of God and does anything good beyond them, he will gain greater glory. This is a plain anticipation of the Roman doctrine of Supererogation or of the additional merits of the saints which a later development taught were laid up in the custody of the Pope for application to those who had gained Indulgences.

After much entreaty the Shepherd also explains the rest of the parable. The 'field is the world, the master is God who created all things, the servant is the Son of God, and the vines are the people that he has planted. The fences are the holy angels and the weeds are the iniquities of the servants of God. The friends who are called together when the master promises to make the servant his heir are the holy angels who were first created. For some strange reason the "son" who consents to the servant being made joint heir with him disappears from this part of the explanation.

Hermas then asks why the son in the parable is given the form of a servant. The Shepherd replies that the Son of God is not given the form of a servant, but great power and lordship. He cleansed the sins of His people, labouring much and undergoing much toil, for no vineyard can be dug without toil and

[p.117]

labour. When He had thus cleansed the sins of His people He gave them the law which He had received from His Father. The Lord took His Son and the glorious angels as His counsellors concerning the heritage of the servant, because God made the Holy Spirit (which goes forth and which created all creation) to dwell in the flesh which He willed.

The flesh served the Spirit well and walked in holiness and purity and did not defile the Spirit. Therefore God chose it as the companion of the Holy Spirit, for the conduct of the flesh pleased Him, because it was not defiled while it was bearing the Spirit on earth.

Therefore He took the Son and the holy angels as counsellors that the flesh which had so served the Spirit should have a place of sojourn and not seem to have lost the reward of its services.

The practical lesson drawn from this is that Hermas must guard his flesh pure and undefiled that it may be justified. He must not think that his flesh is mortal and may therefore be defiled with impunity. To defile the flesh is to defile the Spirit that dwells in it, and the result of such conduct is spiritual death.

The confusion in this parable is extraordinary. It expands the saying of St. Paul, "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy, which temple are ye", and strikes at a common Gnostic opinion that sins of the flesh did not defile the immortal spirit. But its incursion into theology is most unfortunate. It seems to teach an adoptionist Christology in one place and in another confuses the Holy Spirit with the divine nature in Christ. At one time the diligent servant is an adopted son of God who earns the approval of God by his toil, but not by his death. At another time it is the flesh which served the Spirit so well while he dwelt on earth and, in consequence, received the reward of being made co-heir with the Son.

IV

In the ninth parable the confusion is carried still further, for the Shepherd tells Hermas that the Spirit that spoke to him in the form of the Church is the Son of God. He was then too weak in the flesh to receive a revelation from an angel, but when he was strengthened by the Spirit, so that he could see an angel, the building of the tower was shown to him by the Church.

[p.118]

This passage seems to show that the book is a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress*. At first Hermas is only shown the vision of the lady about whom he had entertained unworthy thoughts; then the Son of God who is also the Spirit appeared to him in the form of the Church, and finally the Shepherd, or angel of repentance, was sent to dwell with him, to keep him from sin and to instruct him. Yet all has been revealed through the same Spirit.

This parable is very long and complicated. The significant part of it is that Hermas sees another tower being built, this time on a rock with a door in it. The cutting of the door seemed to be recent, but the rock was old and four-square and large enough to hold the whole world. Twelve maidens stood about the door, and four of them were more glorious than the others. Six men tall and glorious in appearance appeared and summoned a multitude of other men. They set about building a tower on the rock. Many great stones came up from the deep, and the men commanded the maidens to carry the stones through the door that they might be used for the foundations of the tower. The stones for the higher stories of the tower were fetched from twelve mountains that stood round the great rock. Some of these became white, but those which were not carried by the maidens through the door retained their original colours. These stones were removed from the tower, and it was commanded that none should be built into it, except those which were carried by the maidens through the door.

That day the men ceased from building before the tower was completed, and Hermas was told that it could not be finished until the Lord came to test it. A few days after a number of men

came, and in the midst of them one so tall that he overtopped the tower. Among the men were those who had worked at the building. The tall man examined each stone and smote it with a rod, and when he struck some of them they became black, or rotten, or full of cracks, or ill fitting. These stones were removed and replaced by others brought from the plain, and not from the mountains. They were all carried to the builders by the maidens through the door. The Lord then commanded the Shepherd to take care of the stones that had been taken out of the tower and to cleanse them. He was to fit into the building those stones that would fit in with the others and to throw the rest away. If much of the stone had

[p.119]

to be cut away, what remained of it was to be put inside the tower, but those that were larger were to be put outside to hold the rest together. The Shepherd then called twelve women clothed in black, very beautiful, but with cruel faces, and commanded them to take the rejected stones back to the mountains.

When the tower was finished it seemed as if it were all one stone, and no joints were visible.

The general meaning of this parable is obvious, but some of the details are obscure and interesting. The Shepherd tells Hermas that the rock and the door are the Son of God. The rock is old, because the Son of God is older than all creation and He was the counsellor of His creation to the Father. The door is new, because He was manifested in the last days at the end of the world. Those who enter in by the door will be saved, for it is the way into the Kingdom of God.

This is the nearest approach to an orthodox Christology to be found in Hermas, and distinctly recalls the saying of the Fourth Gospel, "I am the door, by me if any man enter in, he shall go in and out and find pasture". It also recalls the Prologue to the Gospel and St. Paul's teaching about the pre-existence of Christ and His part in creation. It is remarkable how little notice this passage has received from those who contend that the Fourth Gospel was only accepted after much hesitation by old-fashioned members of the Church.

The Shepherd states in express terms that no man can enter into the Kingdom of God, except through the name of the Son who was beloved by Him.

The glorious man who came to test the stones in the tower was also the Son of God. The builders are angels, but none of them can enter into the presence of God without the Son. The tower is the Church. The maidens are "holy spirits". No man can enter into the Kingdom unless they clothe him with their clothing. They are the powers of the Son of God. If a man bear His name, but do not bear His power, he will be bearing His name in vain. Their clothing is their names, for even the Son of God bears their names. The names of the maidens are afterwards defined as being Faith, Temperance, Power, Long-suffering, Simplicity, Guilelessness, Holiness, Joyfulness, Truth, Understanding, Concord, Love.

Here we have the beginning of the personification of the virtues which takes so great a position in later poetical writing

[p.120]

and art. It is strange that Love is placed last and not given a place with the four first maidens who are represented as the leaders of their company. The women robed in black are personifications of vices.

The stones which formed the foundation of the tower were the men of the first and second generation of Christians and "the prophets and teachers of the preaching of the Son of God". Some of these after death preached to those who had fallen asleep before them in the power and faith of the Son of God and gave them the seal of their preaching. This is a curious reminiscence of the account given in the First Epistle of St. Peter about the preaching by Christ to the "spirits in prison". It is the only place in which Hermas holds out any hope to non-Christians who are not converted in this life.

V

We see that, though Hermas has in his mind certain phrases and thoughts from the books of the New Testament, they are certainly seldom those which are considered to be the essential parts of the Christian faith now. The Son of God is often referred to, but He is identified with the Spirit and even with the Law (Parable viii. 3. 2), and appears in the form of the Church. There is no mention of the cross, although the "servant" is said to have toiled and suffered to clear the vineyard of weeds. The Incarnation is obscurely referred to in one confused passage, where the Son seems to be identified with the Spirit and the flesh which served Him with the "servant" who was made His co-heir. The Son is the Foundation of the Church (Parable ix. 14. 5), which may be an echo of the words of Jesus to Peter at Caesarea Philippi. He is also the Rock and the Door and the only approach to the Father.

It is to be noted that as the instruction of Hermas proceeds his teaching grows slightly more theological and orthodox, but the main part of it consists of moral teaching and of warnings that repentance after baptism is possible only once. Morality is shown only to be possible with divine assistance, which is personified in the maidens and in the Shepherd, who is the angel of repentance. But on the whole much reliance is placed on merit, and it is taught that it is possible to do more than is commanded and so to obtain more glory and credit with God.

[p.121]

The seeds of the doctrines of Purgatory and of the superfluous merits of the Saints are plainly visible; it is assumed that it is possible to live without sin after baptism, and it seems to be implied that the men of the early generation of Christians attained this perfect state (Parable ix. 15. 6).

It is very strange to find in a book written in Rome these traces of later teaching which have no warrant in the New Testament, but to find no trace of the existence of a Roman bishop, still less of his connection with St. Peter, his consequent supremacy and infallibility.

There is no mention of the Eucharist, although the paintings in the earliest Catacombs make it clear that this rite was an important part of the worship of the Roman Church. Still less is there any reference to the "Sacrifice of the Mass". The author is apparently quite

unconscious of any cult of the Virgin or the Saints, although reverence is shown for the martyrs who are to have the privilege to sit on the right hand of the Church.

VI

Several consequences seem to follow from this study. Firstly, shows the unsatisfactory character of the "argument from silence". In Hermas we have a writer who was certainly acquainted with much of the New Testament, as is shown by verbal allusions to several books in it, but makes no direct quotations of any length. In particular the Epistle to the Romans is neither alluded to nor are its peculiar doctrines treated with any respect. Rather it is contradicted.

Secondly, if Hermas is to be regarded as an average member of the Church founded by one of the greatest Apostles and perhaps by two of them, what probability is there that a body composed of such people could "spontaneously" have produced the New Testament, and especially the Gospels, as a certain school of critics would have us believe?

But we can hardly regard Hermas as an average believer. His book nearly got into the Canon. It was translated into Latin, Ethiopic and Coptic and may have been translated into other languages. It was also thought worthy of a place in the Codex Sinaiticus even in the fourth century, fragments of it are found in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, and it was quoted by Clement of Alexandria.

[p.122]

The Greek in which the book is written cannot be called illiterate, but it is neither rhetorical nor polished, and the curious uses of ἴνα which abound in the New Testament and which seem to be characteristic of vulgar Greek of the period appear frequently in it. The writer was either a man of the people, or deliberately wrote as one of them would be expected to write.

If this is the kind of book that the ordinary Christian of the second century appreciated and that one who was perhaps a little more skilled than his fellows produced, what possibility is there that such a community could have produced the Gospels as we have them now?

In fact there is curiously little Christianity, except from the point of view of morals, with some stress on the Sacraments and Church order such as is found in any of the Apostolic Fathers, except the Epistle to Diognetus. It took time for such teaching as that contained in the New Testament to be understood, except on that side which it is most easy to understand, if not to practise, namely its moral side.

It is this side which is most obvious still to many who call themselves Christians. They have a clearer grasp of it than Hermas had, and do not need to express their thoughts through a mist of symbol and parable. But the essential part of the meaning of the life of Jesus still escapes them. Baptism has some meaning to them, but it cannot be said that they understand "the word of the cross", which is as much foolishness to them as it was to the Greeks in the days when it was first proclaimed by the Apostles. If they have any belief in the Incarnation, it tends in an adoptionist direction, and Jesus is to them a man who was filled with the Spirit of God and whose teaching they respect, but put on one side

as impracticable and purely ideal. They have never learnt the lesson which even Hermas dimly comprehended, that the stones cannot be built into the tower unless they are carried to it through the Door.

© 1946. H.P.V. Nunn. All reasonable efforts have been made to contact the current copyright holder of this article without success. If you own the rights, please contact me.

Prepared for the Web in December 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/>
