

## CHAPTER III

### LITERATURE: (c) PATRISTIC

We come now to a survey, which limitations of space compel to be somewhat brief, of the remaining Ante-Nicene literature; the literature, that is, which, with the exception of the Church Orders, never made any claim to having been produced by apostles or apostolic men, and was never considered for inclusion in the canon.

Before embarking upon the task, however, it will be well to make a few observations on early Christian literature in general with which a modern reader is apt to be impatient. He finds the writers profuse and even dull, and in places almost puerile. But any one who studies these writings with sympathy cannot escape feeling that the authors are endeavouring to mediate valuable experiences, and if he makes up his mind to follow a hard and oft-times obscure path, he will at length arrive at a special and privileged standpoint from which to view the development of Christian life and thought.

Although our interest is fixed on the West, the survey which we shall make cannot be confined strictly to that portion of the Ante-Nicene Church, for works produced in the East undoubtedly in this era played their part in the development of Western ideas. This applies, above all, to the writings of the Alexandrian school. In any case the earliest writings in the West itself were in Greek, for it was not until the close of the second century that any clear traces of Christian Latin literature can be discerned.

The amount of the literature that we have to consider is not very vast and no doubt much has disappeared. The question thus arises as to how far what survives can be taken as representative of the mind of the Church as a whole. No doubt many works of a heretical tinge have deliberately been suppressed or allowed to perish, but probably what remains of the literature as a whole gives a balanced view of the main line of development in our period. Certain authors have, of course, been fortunate in this matter; more survives of Tertullian, for example, than of Cicero, but we shall not on this account give them undue weight.

But if the amount of literature is not very vast it has striking variety, especially after the middle of the second century and the end of the so-called age of the apologists. This last may roughly be dated from 120 to 170 and it has earned its name

through the survival, when much else has perished, of works of an apologetic nature. The value of these works is unfortunately rather limited, for in writings in defence of Christianity against the attacks of pagans, and even of Jews, not a great deal is said about the faith and practices of the Church—though here Justin Martyr is an exception. The early Christians up to the time of the triumph of the Gospel were exceedingly reticent in such matters, and in strong contrast to modern ideas the Scriptures themselves were often withheld from heathen notice.

After about 170, Christian literature made a great advance, especially in the West, with the emergence of Latin writings, with a parallel in the East in those of the school of Alexandria. In place of short compositions of no particular literary merit we have elaborate treatises and a definite advance in craftsmanship. This change was due to the gradual penetration by Christianity of the higher levels of intellectual and social life. Clement and Origen were worthy to take their place in any literary or philosophical circle, and, in the West Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Cyprian were writers of outstanding merit. The same age saw also the production of numerous letters and essays, of chronicles, and even of romances, such as those considered in the previous chapter. All alike were intended to meet the new needs which had arisen with the growth of the Christian community, needs which were at once practical and intellectual. Before going on to the more regular line of development represented by the apologists and theologians, two classes of writing may conveniently be considered—the acts of the Martyrs,<sup>1</sup> and the Church Orders.

There are scholars who consider that behind the various descriptions of the sufferings and trials of the martyrs we have definite official records of the Roman courts. But this is hardly likely to have been the case, although reminiscences of legal language may undoubtedly be found in them and the use of technical terms, due perhaps to those who had actually been present at their trials. The genuineness of most of the acts of the martyrs has been questioned, and rightly so, for many original accounts may have perished in the Diocletianic persecution when there was a considerable destruction of Christian records. That it was the custom to collect accounts of various martyrs we know from Eusebius (IV, xv, 46–48). The best known and most authentic accounts of definite incidents which we possess are concerned with the Scillitan martyrs,<sup>2</sup> Perpetua and her companions,<sup>3</sup> the sufferings of the martyrs of Vienne and

<sup>1</sup> See E. C. E. Owen, *Some Authentic Acts of the Early Martyrs*.

<sup>2</sup> Edited by Armitage Robinson in *Texts and Studies*, I, No. 2, pp. 112–117.

<sup>3</sup> Both the Latin and the Greek forms are edited in the volume mentioned in the previous note.

Lyons (in Euseb., V, i-xi), and the Proconsular Acts of Cyprian,<sup>1</sup> all of which have already received notice in their appropriate places in Part II.

Although the Church Orders, with the possible exception of the so-called *Egyptian Church Order* which will be discussed later, are all the products of the East, it is necessary to take some notice of them, as they are known to have circulated in the West; the Verona Manuscript is evidence of this,<sup>2</sup> though it is probable that they exerted no great influence during our period. The most comprehensive of them, *The Apostolic Constitutions*, after being almost forgotten in the West, came to play a considerable part in post-Reformation controversy. Although *The Apostolic Constitutions* belongs to the latter part of the fourth century, it is based upon much earlier material and therefore forms a good starting-point for an inquiry into the whole subject;<sup>3</sup> though the editor made some additions of his own and also modified the material which he used. The work is divided into eight books. Behind the first six lies the *Didascalia Apostolorum*,<sup>4</sup> which comes from North Syria and, apart from later additions, may belong to the middle of the second century. It exists in a Syriac version and fragments in the Verona MS. Behind Book VII is the *Didache* and other matter; whilst Book VIII is based on what used to be known as the *Egyptian Church Order*, but is now generally referred to as the *Church Order* or *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus.<sup>5</sup> In spite of their diverse origins, the various sections are traditionally said to have been the work of the apostles assembled at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

The question of the authorship of the *Egyptian Church Order*, which survives in Coptic, Ethiopic, and Arabic versions, together with fragments in the Verona MS., and the various documents allied to it,<sup>6</sup> is of great importance for our study, for if any of them can be traced ultimately to Hippolytus we have evidence for conditions in the West which otherwise would be lacking, so far as Church Orders are concerned. The suggestion that Hippolytus was responsible for the *Egyptian Church Order* was first made by Baron Eduard von der Goltz in 1906, but it

<sup>1</sup> Benson considered that these *acta* were older than the *Vita Cypriani* of Pontius who had been his deacon.

<sup>2</sup> This palimpsest has been edited by E. Hauler, *Didasc. Apost. Fragmenta Veron. Latina*. It includes fragments of the chief orders.

<sup>3</sup> The standard edition is F. X. Funk, *Didascalia et Const. Apost.*, published in two volumes in 1905.

<sup>4</sup> See, in addition to Funk, R. H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 1929.

<sup>5</sup> The latest edition, of which Vol. I was published in 1937, is by G. H. Dix.

<sup>6</sup> These consist of *Canones Hippolyti*, existing in an Arabic document published by Achelis in 1891 (*Texte und Unters.*, VI, Pt. IV); the *Epitome*, a summary of Book VIII of *Apost. Const.*, often referred to as the *Constitutions of Hippolytus*; and *The Testament of our Lord*, which is contained in the *Syrian Octateuch*.

attracted little attention until a few years later when Edward Schwartz quite independently arrived at the same conclusion. The authorship is now generally accepted, though it has been challenged by R. Lorentz in *De Egyptische Kerkenordening en Hippolytus van Rome*,<sup>1</sup> and, in this country, by J. Vernon Bartlet in his Birkbeck Lectures on *Church-Life and Church-Order*. The question is too technical for discussion here, but in view of the arguments of Bartlet I feel that anything in the so-called Hippolytean Church Orders must be used with caution when considering conditions in the West.

Another collection which so far as its first two books are concerned is connected with the same Order is *The Syrian Octateuch*. An edition with a Greek translation was published by Lagarde as long ago as 1856,<sup>2</sup> but it failed to arouse any notice, and in any case gave not the full text but only generous extracts. Books I and II were published in Syriac by Rahmani in 1899.<sup>3</sup> Five years later came Horner, *The Statutes of the Apostles or Canones Eccles.*, and finally in 1913 F. Nau, *La Version syriaque de l'octateuque de Clément*. The last title is due to the tradition that the work was issued by Clement of Rome for the apostles.

An earlier work was *The Apostolic Church Order*<sup>4</sup> which appears to come from a Church, perhaps in Egypt, which was still in what may be called the missionary stage. Its various sections, like those of the *Apost. Const.*, are attributed to the different apostles. The first fourteen sections deal with ethics (cf. the early part of the *Didache*) and the latter sixteen with organization.

In view of the picture of ordinary church life which these Orders present, it will be useful to give some idea of the contents of that associated with Hippolytus. It is divided into three parts which deal respectively with the Clergy, the Laity, and Church Observances. The part dealing with the clergy begins naturally with the choice and consecration of bishops; this is followed by a description of the eucharist which the newly consecrated bishop celebrates. Then come forms for blessing oil, cheese and olives. The remaining sections deal shortly with the ordination of presbyters and deacons and the position of confessors, widows, readers, virgins, and subdeacons. The part concerned with the laity deals with those who are attracted to the faith, with a

<sup>1</sup> H. Eilers, *Die Kirchenordnung Hippolyts von Rom*, 1938, claims to have refuted Lorentz.

<sup>2</sup> *Reliquiae Juris eccles. antiquissimae*.

<sup>3</sup> *Test. Domini nostri Jesu Christi*. There is an English translation by Cooper and Maclean.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek text is appended to Harnack, "Die Lehre der zwölf Apost." in *Texte und Unters.*, II, Pt. V. See also F. X. Funk, *Doctrina Duodecim Apost.*, and the Syriac version, with variants from the Coptic, by J. P. Arendzen in *J.T.S.*, 1901, III, p. 59 ff. Latin fragments are contained in the Verona MS.

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special notice of the position of slaves. There follows a long catalogue of crafts and professions which are to be avoided by Christians. It then returns to the preparation of catechumens and provides a prayer for their use. There is then a description of Baptism and Confirmation. The third part dealing with Church Observances is comprehensive and slightly discursive. It has sections on the Stationary Mass, Agapes in private houses, the importance of giving thanks over a meal and of remembering the sick to whom food should be sent. One interesting section is concerned with the bringing in of lamps for suppers at which the congregation assembles together. Then there is a command that first-fruits are to be brought to the bishop to be blessed by him. Fasting before the Paschal Feast is then noticed and there are several sections on the times for prayer. Especial care is ordered for the reverent treatment of the consecrated elements when they are taken home instead of being consumed at the Eucharist. There is a section on the Public Cemetery and another on the use of the sign of the cross in temptation. This outline gives us something of the background of the everyday life of Christians in the early centuries, a subject which receives detailed treatment in Part III, Chap. VII.

## THE APOLOGISTS

In the face of persecution and misrepresentation, the Christian Church was compelled to explain itself and its teaching, and in so doing it entered for the first time into the common world of literature. The writings of the apologists "thus possess a significance out of all proportion to their intellectual ability or to the intrinsic literary merits of their works" (*Camb. Anct. Hist.*, XII, p. 460). Apart from the numerous productions of Tertullian, two only of the works, which appeared before the third century was well on its way, exhibit outstanding literary aptitude, and both of them are comparatively short. They are the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus*, written in Greek and mentioned in Chapter I above; and the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, in Latin. By some critics the latter is said to have been more interested in literary art than in the Christian religion.

The apologists had to meet attacks on two different planes, the practical and the intellectual. They had, that is, to defend their way of life from calumnies and to justify it to the governing authorities; they had also to expound their special beliefs to the pagan world and its thinkers. There was nothing exactly novel in this double procedure, for Philo and Josephus had undertaken the same task in defence of Judaism, and doubtless the way of approach of their Jewish predecessors was of assistance

to the Christian writers. In the New Testament itself the two writings of St. Luke had possibly the same object. Some of the apologies are addressed to individuals, the emperors and others, some to the senate, some apparently to the general public. It may be remarked that those intended for rulers may never have reached the persons to whom they are addressed; possibly they were not even expected to do so, but were a kind of academic exercise calculated to enhance the intellectual and social prestige of Christianity. The apologists are not above stooping to the use of rhetoric, as when Tertullian claims that only bad emperors like Nero and Domitian had been persecutors (*Apol.*, V), or makes exaggerated claims of the influence and extent of the Christian Church. Others were more cautious: Tatian bitterly condemned the use of rhetoric in any shape or form, it was only good to serve injustice and slander (*Ad Graecos*, I); whilst Cyprian deprecated its use in the cause of Christ, it was better to let the facts speak for themselves (*Ad Donatum*, X).

In attempting to persuade pagan philosophers and men of culture of the truth of the Gospel, the apologists were undertaking a hard task and it is doubtful if their writings, at least before the rise of the Alexandrians, had much effect. It is true that Justin Martyr, a typical inquirer as his story tells us, after failing to find satisfaction in any philosophical system, was drawn at last to Christianity by the testimony of a believer (*Dial.*, II–VIII). But what had really aroused his interest and sympathy was the constancy of Christians (I *Apol.*, VIII; II *Apol.*, XII). It must be confessed that the methods adopted by the apologists were scarcely likely to appeal to cultivated thinkers who were not already disposed to give them a sympathetic hearing. Origen might recognize the futility of appealing to allegory when arguing with the heathen; but others, both before and after him, were not so circumspect. As one studies their writings, although one may agree with the positions they strive to maintain, the arguments adduced strike one as being quite unconvincing to an outsider who did not accept their premises. But probably such works were intended primarily for "home consumption", to convince the simple believer that a good case could be made out for Christianity and to repel the onslaughts of the pagans. This would explain, perhaps, the large amount of space devoted to the exposure and belittling of the gods of the heathen.

One remarkable feature of the writings of the apologists, however, tells against this supposed use of their works: the strange absence of appeals to the Scriptures. This can be seen, for example, by comparing Tertullian's *Apology* with his other works. They followed in this the principle laid down by their

Master (Matt. 7:6) of not casting pearls before swine. The method was evidently widely accepted, for Lactantius (*Div. Instit.*, V, 4) could condemn Cyprian because he quoted Scripture in a work intended for pagans. Tertullian, although he would even disallow any appeal to the Scriptures when arguing with heretics (*De Praes.*, XIX), was quite willing that they should not be kept back from pagans who cared to read them (*Apol.*, XXXI). Some of the opponents of the Gospel seem, indeed, to have had an intimate knowledge of their subject, such as Celsus and Porphyry, the latter may indeed have been a renegade. In any case the New Testament, so far as it then existed, would have carried little weight with the heathen, though the Old, on account of its antiquity, might have commanded more respect.

The line of attack which such opponents took up can be surmised with some accuracy from the replies which they called forth. The criticisms of Celsus, for example, are known from the detailed refutation of them made some sixty years later by Origen. The same is true of the arguments of the pagan philosopher in the *Apocriticus* of Macarius Magnes. The latter, who represents the point of view of Neoplatonism, was a very dangerous, if much more sympathetic antagonist; for whereas earlier attacks had belittled the Founder of Christianity and poured scorn on the attempts of His illiterate followers to solve problems which had baffled the learned of all ages, this writer professes to hold Jesus in high regard; but he condemns the Christians for having completely misunderstood His teaching. The arguments advanced by the heathen in the *Octavius* have been thought by some to be those of Fronto, the tutor of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>1</sup>

The first apologies of which we have record are said by Eusebius to have been presented or dedicated to Hadrian in 126 by Quadratus and Aristides respectively (IV, iii, 1-3, *Chron.*, p. 281). There is, however, some doubt about the date, though Hadrian, with his tolerant outlook and insatiable curiosity, might seem to have been likely to take favourable notice of a Christian approach. In 1889, however, Rendel Harris discovered a Syriac version of the *Apology of Aristides*<sup>2</sup> which, as Armitage Robinson pointed out, was identical with a speech in *The Life of Barlaam and Josaphat*. As this was written in Greek, it gave presumably the original text, and was addressed, not to Hadrian, but to his successor Antoninus Pius. A Greek fragment has also been discovered in a papyrus.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Especially by Schanz. Fronto was certainly very different from Caecilius for he was a rhetorician with an aversion for philosophy and an adherent of the old religion, while Caecilius was a sceptic.

<sup>2</sup> *Texts and Studies*, I, No. 1, with an appendix by Armitage Robinson.

<sup>3</sup> Now in the British Museum. Text in *J.T.S.*, 1923, XXV, p. 73 ff.