

G. R. S. MEAD



THE BIG NEST

CHRISTIAN
CLASSICS

Apollonius of Tyana

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTORY

To the student of the origins of Christianity there is naturally no period in Western history of greater interest and importance than the first century of our era; and yet how little comparatively is known about it of a really definite and reliable nature. If it be a subject of lasting regret that no non-Christian writer of the first century had sufficient intuition of the future to record even a line of information concerning the birth and growth of what was to be the religion of the Western world, equally disappointing is it to find so little definite information of the general social and religious conditions of the time. The rulers and the wars of the Empire seem to have formed the chief interest of the historiographers of the succeeding century, and even in this department of political history, though the public acts of the Emperors may be fairly well known, for we can check them by records and inscriptions, when we come to their private acts and motives we find ourselves no longer on the ground of history, but for the most part in the atmosphere of prejudice, scandal, and speculation. The political acts of Emperors and their officers, however can at best throw but a dim side-light on the general social conditions of the time, while they shed no light at all on the religious conditions, except so far as these in any particular contacted the domain of politics. As well might we seek to reconstruct a picture of the religious life of the time from Imperial acts and rescripts, as endeavour to glean any idea of the intimate religion of this country from a perusal of statute books or reports of Parliamentary debates.

The Roman histories so-called, to which we have so far been accustomed, cannot help us in the reconstruction of a picture of the environment into which, on the one hand, Paul led the new faith in Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome; and in which, on the other, it already found itself in the districts bordering on the south-east of the Mediterranean. It is only by piecing together

labouriously isolated scraps of information and fragments of inscriptions, that we become aware of the existence of the life of a world of religious associations and private cults which existed at this period. Not that even so we have any very direct information of what went on in these associations, guilds, and brotherhoods; but we have sufficient evidence to make us keenly regret the absence of further knowledge.

Difficult as this field is to till, it is exceedingly fertile in interest, and it is to be regretted that comparatively so little work has as yet been done in it; and that, as is so frequently the case, the work which has been done is, for the most part, not accessible to the English reader. What work has been done on this special subject may be seen from the bibliographical note appended to this essay, in which is given a list of books and articles treating of the religious associations among the Greeks and Romans. But if we seek to obtain a general view of the condition of religious affairs in the first century we find ourselves without a reliable guide; for of works dealing with this particular subject there are few, and from them we learn little that does not immediately concern, or is thought to concern, Christianity; whereas, it is just the state of the non-Christian religious world about which, in the present case, we desire to be informed.

If, for instance, the reader turn to works of general history, such as Merivale's *History of the Romans under the Empire* (London; last ed. 1865), he will find, it is true, in chap iv., a description of the state of religion up to the death of Nero, but he will be little wiser for perusing it. If he turn to Hermann Schiller's *Geschichte der römischen Kaiserreiche unter der Regierung des Nero* (Berlin; 1872), he will find much reason for discarding the vulgar opinions about the monstrous crimes imputed to Nero, as indeed he might do by reading in English G. H. Lewes' article "Was Nero a Monster?" (*Cornhill Magazine*; July 1863)—and he will also find (bk IV chap III.) a general view of the religion and philosophy of the time which is far more intelligent than that of Merivale's; but all is still very vague and unsatisfactory, and we feel ourselves still outside the intimate life of the philosophers and religionists of the first century.

If, again, he turn to the latest writers of Church history who have treated this particular question, he will find that they are occupied entirely with the contact of the Christian Church with the Roman Empire, and only incidentally give us any information of the nature of which we are in search. On this special ground C J. Neumann, in his careful study *Der römische Staat und die allgemeine Kirche bis auf Diocletian* (Leipzig; 1890), is interesting; while Prof W M. Ramsay, in *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170* (London; 1893), is extraordinary, for he endeavours to interpret Roman history by the New Testament documents, the dates of the majority of which are so hotly disputed.

But, you may say, what has all this to do with Apollonius of Tyana? The answer is simple: Apollonius lived in the first century; his work lay precisely among these religious associations, colleges and guilds. A knowledge of them and their nature would give us the natural environment of a great part of his life; and information as to their condition in the first century would perhaps help us the better to understand some of the reasons for the task which he attempted.

If, however, it were only the life and endeavours of Apollonius which would be illuminated by this knowledge, we could understand why so little effort has been spent in this direction; for the character of the Tyanean, as we shall see, has since the fourth century been regarded with little favour even by the few, while the many have been taught to look upon our philosopher not only as a charlatan, but even as an anti-Christ. But when it is just a knowledge of these religious associations and orders which would throw a flood of light on the earliest evolution of Christianity, not only with regard to the Pauline communities, but also with regard to those schools which were subsequently condemned as heretical, it is astonishing that we have no more satisfactory work done on the subject.

It may be said, however, that this information is not forthcoming simply because it is unprocurable. To a large extent this is true; nevertheless, a great deal more could be done than has yet been attempted, and the results of research in special

directions and in the byways of history could be combined, so that the non-specialist could obtain some general idea of the religious conditions of the times, and so be less inclined to join in the now stereotyped condemnation of all non-Jewish or non-Christian moral and religious effort in the Roman Empire of the first century.

But the reader may retort: Things social and religious in those days must have been in a very parlous state, for, as this essay shows, Apollonius himself spent the major part of his life in trying to reform the institutions and cults of the Empire. To this we answer: No doubt there was much to reform, and when is there not? But it would not only be not generous, but distinctly mischievous for us to judge our fellows of those days solely by the lofty standard of an ideal morality, or even to scale them against the weight of our own supposed virtues and knowledge. Our point is not that there was nothing to reform, far from that, but that the wholesale accusations of depravity brought against the times will not bear impartial investigation. On the contrary, there was much good material ready to be worked up in many ways, and if there has not been, how could there among other things have been any Christianity?

The Roman Empire was at the zenith of its power, and had there not been many admirable administrators and men of worth in the governing caste, such a political consummation could never have been reached and maintained. Moreover, as ever previously in the ancient world, religious liberty was guaranteed, and where we find persecution, as in the reigns of Nero and Domitian, it must be set down to political and not to theological reasons. Setting aside the disputed question of the persecution of the Christians under Domitian, the Neronian persecution was directed against those whom the Imperial power regarded as Jewish political revolutionaries. So, too, when we find the philosophers imprisoned or banished from Rome during those two reigns, it was not because they were philosophers, but because the ideal of some of them was the restoration of the Republic, and this rendered them obnoxious to the charge not only of being political malcontents, but also of actively plotting against the Emperor's majestas. Apollonius, however, was