

SOME LETTERS OF ST. AUGUSTINE ¹

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THE secular reader of St. Augustine's *Confessions* must sometimes regret the tantalizingly cursory references to contemporary events and persons, often just mentioned by the writer and then dropped as having no direct bearing on his spiritual development. It is true that the work was not written to assist historical curiosity: it is a self-critical acknowledgment of the predestinating will which, in spite of much resistance and pride, had led him to accept Christian truth and had also delivered him from vice and ambition. He mentions therefore only those persons and things which have seemed instrumental in the Divine purpose: all else is discarded as casual and unimportant. Thus, when he went to Italy in the years 383-388 and taught as a Professor of Rhetoric at Rome and Milan, we meet Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, but as the human being who gave a kind welcome to the African stranger, as the bishop who spoke to Augustine in the highest terms of praise for Monica's faith, and as the preacher through whom Augustine was converted to Christianity. Of Ambrose, the statesman, the aristocrat, diplomat, man of letters, and controversialist we hear very little. He tells us again that in 385 he pronounced a panegyric before the Emperor in the Imperial Court: but he tells us nothing of the oration and his treatment of the theme (except that it was mostly false), nothing of the personages assembled, and nothing of the occasion: he is solely concerned with his own morbid unhappiness as he walks through the streets of Milan to the palace, undecided whether to follow his hopes of preferment in the State, or to obey the Divine call. By his favourite method of contrast he presents the famous picture of himself on the very threshold of fortune, yet depressed by the prospect; then the encounter

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on the 8th of March, 1950.

with the drunk beggar so elated and carefree in spite of his squalor and poverty ; then Augustine's moralizing reflexion on human happiness—so inconstant, so irrational, so unpredictable. It is a magnificent portrayal of his state of mind ; but I would gladly have had something more—the city, the court, the scene in the royal presence, the audience, the applause, the rhetoric, and the flatteries which he addressed to the youthful Valentinian II. But if it is uncritical to expect such a description in a religious study like the *Confessions*, it would at least have been interesting to have had Augustine's full account (for he gives only a casual reference) of the complex religious situation in Milan at this time. The orator had just ceased to be a member of the prohibited Manichæan sect ; the Emperor's mother was a fanatical Arian and was attempting to seize one of the Milanese churches for her co-religionists ; and the dominating force in the city was Bishop Ambrose, the champion of orthodoxy, who had been victorious in his long fight against paganism and was equally resolute in opposing the effrontery of the Arians. Augustine was in the midst of history, yet he ignores this wealth of material as irrelevant or accidental : in the *Confessions* he is the supreme introvert, and towards externals he appears supremely impassive.

The *Confessions* record his life down to the time when, after his baptism at Milan and after his mother's death at Ostia, he returned to Africa in 388 at the age of thirty-four. He had abandoned his academic career and had pledged himself to a life of study and meditation, and particularly to the study of the Scriptures and Christian doctrine. He settled first at his native Tagaste in company with a few friends who shared his desire for quietism. But his reputation as a scholar stood high in Africa ; and, as the Church needed such men, he was in 391 ordained presbyter at Hippo Regius, then in 395 consecrated coadjutor-bishop and soon afterwards sole Bishop of Hippo—an office which he held for thirty-five years till his death in 430, endlessly engaged in administering his See, in composing his theological works and in defending the orthodox faith against heresies. For a view of him in this period we must turn to the Epistles which, numbering 269 in all, show us much of his interests and activities from his conversion till the year before his death.

These Epistles are not genuine letters like Cicero's, not private correspondence revealing the personal details of his ordinary life. Augustine's Letters are mainly concerned with his public position as a Bishop and as a controversialist on behalf of the Christian cause. Compared with the Letters of his older contemporary Ambrose, their range is limited. Ambrose was constantly handling great affairs of state as well as matters of doctrine and Church policy, and the variety of his interests is seen in his correspondence. Augustine's interests are almost entirely ecclesiastical and theological: some of his letters are minor treatises on some matter of faith or interpretation: some are answers to the intellectual or spiritual problems of his friends and his clergy: some provide an informal commentary on his published work: some are letters of commendation on behalf of a friend travelling overseas: some, often couched in terms of elaborately pious compliment, convey greetings to eminent Churchmen: some issue a challenge to his theological opponents to meet him in a public debate and thresh out their differences. It is interesting to see how the letters reveal the development of the man. At first, soon after his conversion, he still has the air of the consciously academic *illuminatus*: he is, as it were, the philosophic and religious consultant to his group of friends. But as the Christian priesthood more and more absorbs him, there comes into his letters a grave and earnest purposefulness. He is resolved to devote himself on the one hand to the necessary and immediate duties concerned with administering his See, and on the other to the prosecution of his theological studies *ubi me arbitror . . . etiam posteris aliquid profuturum*. As he grows to the fulness of his stature, his influence begins to pervade the whole theological scene in North Africa and to spread across the Mediterranean. He exchanges letters with Jerome, that other great contemporary figure of the Latin Church. It is this compact body of correspondence between Augustine and Jerome that I propose to take as the field of this study: the study itself will deal with only the main incidents of the interchange.

If Ambrose was the statesman of the Latin Church, and Augustine the thinker and teacher, Jerome was unquestionably

the scholar. He had been educated at Rome under one of the greatest rhetoricians and grammarians of the fourth century, Aelius Donatus. As a young man he had travelled both in the Western and the Eastern parts of the Empire. At Antioch he had caught the prevalent passion for monasticism and, abandoning his study of profane literature, had devoted himself exclusively to perfecting his knowledge of Greek, to learning Hebrew, and to making available in Latin translations the best works of the Greek theological commentators. In 382 he had returned to Rome and had been commissioned by Pope Damasus to revise the text of the Latin Scriptures so as to provide the Western Church with an authentic and authoritative translation that would replace the interpolated and inaccurate versions then in use. Within two years he had produced at Rome a new version of the Gospels and of the Psalms, and was proceeding with the remaining parts of this vast undertaking when he decided to retire from Italy and return again to the East. He settled at Bethlehem, where he established a monastery over which he presided; and there he lived for the rest of his life, engaged on his many literary works and especially on his version of the Scriptures.

Jerome's new Latin version of the Gospels had been fairly well received in the West. While correcting errors, he had been careful to avoid any undue alteration of the wording, and this respect for the traditional and familiar phraseology had disarmed much criticism. It was different, however, when he came to deal with the Old Testament. At first he had based his translation not directly on the Hebrew, but on a purged version of the Greek Septuagint which Origen had prepared for his famous Hexapla edition. As a scrupulous scholar, Origen had everywhere marked with asterisks and obelisks the passages where comparison with the Hebrew had caused him to vary the received and traditional Septuagint text; and Jerome, in following Origen, adopted the same system of diacritical signs in his new Latin text. By some carelessness or some accident, the whole of this version with the exception of Job and the Psalms had been lost, and the undaunted translator had started on another rendering—this time not the translation of a translation, but a direct translation from the Hebrew into Latin, a method which

owing to the authority universally accorded to the Septuagint was bound to provoke criticism and objection—as he puts it himself in the Preface to the Pentateuch, *periculosum opus certe et obtrectatorum meorum latratibus patens, qui me asserunt in septuaginta interpretum sugillationem nova pro veteribus cudere*. But Jerome is certain that his new method is right. If the LXX version had remained as it left the hands of the original translators, his own work, he admits, would be unnecessary; but different traditions of the LXX text are prevalent and accepted in different provinces, and these traditions have been so vitiated by the copyists over a period of centuries, that there is no longer in the Septuagint that authenticity which, he is very willing to allow, it had at its first appearance. In the circumstances, there are two ways of proceeding—either to assemble the oldest possible copies of the various LXX traditions and by critical judgement, assisted by a knowledge of Hebrew, to make a composite text as the basis for a Latin version, or to go direct to the Hebrew sources and make a new translation. The first method he rejects as extremely difficult and expensive: the second he follows, knowing well what it will involve. And he was not mistaken. As the various Old Testament books appeared in their new Latin form, they were not, if we may judge by his prefaces, at first well received in the Western Church. The unavoidable changes in wording and in sense were too great for congregations which were conservatively attached to the older versions and had seldom the scholarship to examine and test the bases of Jerome's work. The introductions to each section of his translation are a spirited and often vehement assertion of his critical principles and methods in reply to the detractors who (he says) privately read his version and publicly defame it. He did not wish to supersede the older versions: he had not undertaken his new work in any spirit of superiority or contempt. *Obsecro te, lector, ne laborem meum reprehensionem existimes antiquorum: in templo Dei offert unusquisque quod potest*. His attackers are *latrantes canes qui adversum me rabido ore saeviunt*: they imagine themselves as learned, not from any positive contribution to scholarship, but because they can carp destructively. Why is it, he asks, that the sacred writings

are the only field of study in which scholarly methods are banned, and pious but ignorant men, *sancta rusticitas*, are at liberty to set up their own standards of interpretation? *Sola scripturarum ars est quam sibi passim omnes vindicant. 'scribimus indocti doctique poemata passim.'* *hanc garrula anus, hanc delirus senex, hanc sophista verbosus, hanc universi praesumunt, lacerant, docent antequam discant.* (*Epist. ad Paulinum.*) The fact is that in no sphere is critical and methodical scholarship more needed, if Truth is to be guarded and taught. He appeals to fair-minded men to read his translation carefully before they criticize it: it is an honest and scrupulous attempt to render the just sense of the original documents: *mihi omnino conscius non sum, mutasse me quippiam de hebraica veritate.* In all cases of doubt he advises his readers to test his translation by consulting some local Jewish scholar whom they can trust to answer fairly. This had been his own practice. He tells us that in translating Job he had hired as his assistant a reputable Jewish teacher from Lydda. In preparing to translate Chronicles he had studied the antiquities of Judaea (*II Praef. in Paralipomenon*) under the guidance of the most capable Jewish experts and had personally inspected the topography and sites of all the places mentioned in the book; and in the actual translation he took as his assistant a Jewish doctor of the law from Tiberias and had conferred with him on every detail of the work, *contuli cum eo a vertice, ut aiunt, usque ad extremum unguem.* He gives (*Praef. in Tobiam*) a vivid account of his work on Tobias. This was especially troublesome as being written in the Chaldaean language, but in Hebrew characters: and though he had as a young man with great difficulty acquired some knowledge of Chaldaean, he thought it best to invite the collaboration of an interpreter. The interpreter orally translated the Chaldaean into Hebrew for Jerome, who simultaneously dictated a Latin version to a secretary: and the method was so successful that the translation of Tobias was completed in a day.

The writings of this formidable scholar even to-day make good reading, as I shall hope to show. His Latin style is vigorous, direct and lively. He is never dull. His utterance is witty, provocative and pungent. His command of vituperation is

unrivalled. In his critical method, in his genuine enthusiasm for knowledge and study, in his love of polemic, and in the amplitude and quality of the abuse which he could summon to the defence whether of truth or opinion, he seems a progenitor of the classical scholars of the Renaissance. His reputation was so great and his remoteness so complete that Augustine, despairing of ever meeting him, now tried to establish a friendly connexion by a regular exchange of letters. How the exchange developed into a difference, a dispute, almost a war, it is the purpose of this paper to show.

The correspondence began when in 394 or 395 Augustine wrote to Jerome a letter of commendation on behalf of his friend Profuturus who was proposing, in the course of a journey abroad, to visit the Holy Land and Bethlehem.¹ Augustine, though addressing Jerome in terms of the highest consideration and courtesy, feels that he may drop the strictly formal manner of such letters, as he can claim a considerable knowledge of Jerome both through his published writings and from the personal account which he had had from his life-long friend Alypius, recently back from a visit to the East. It will not be improper, therefore, to presume on this acquaintance so far as to exceed the limits of a mere letter of introduction and to discuss some of those religious problems which their common devotion to the Church had suggested. And first, he begs Jerome to continue with that series of translations into Latin which had given the West many works of the Greek commentators on Scripture and particularly of Origen, that most eminent scholar of the Eastern Church for whom Jerome had a profound admiration. Among the works thus translated was Origen's commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, to which, as it provides one of the reasons for the clash between the correspondents, we shall revert shortly.

Augustine seems to suggest that, to his mind and the mind of many of his friends, Jerome would be adding more to the Christian education of the West by producing this kind of

¹ Aug., Ep. xxviii. (ed. Al. Goldbacher, C.S.E.L., 1904. As Jerome's replies to Augustine are included in this edition, it will be convenient to refer to them there.)

commentary than by his present project of translating the Old Testament into Latin from Hebrew sources. If he is resolved, however, to revise the Latin Old Testament, Augustine believes that the earlier method he had used in Job was better—to work from the Greek version of the Septuagint, correcting it against the Semitic original, but using a system of diacritical signs to denote every point where the LXX required to be altered by the addition of genuine matter or the omission of corruptions. The readers of the new Latin version would thus be enabled to see at once how much was attested by the venerable authority of the Septuagint and what parts must be taken on trust from the translator alone. For to Augustine, as to most students of Scripture in his age, the Septuagint seemed to be invested with an almost inviolate sanctity. He regarded any tampering with its text as tampering with the text used and approved by the first Apostles and the early Church. Besides, in whichever language, it was part of the common Scripture of the Catholic Church, a bond between East and West, a force for unity, a court of appeal in all disputed questions, and incontestable evidence for refuting heresy or establishing doctrine. Augustine accords it to a *gravissima auctoritas* : and again, he says *prae-eminentem auctoritatem sine controversia tribuendam existimo*. He sees danger in any action which might tend to diminish or invalidate this authority. As a ruler, teacher, and writer in the Church's service, he must defend her tenets and laws by appealing to the fundamental and unshakable Word ; and he fears that Jerome's new critical scholarship, by eliminating the LXX and returning to older but far less accessible sources, is weakening the accepted basis on which dogma and discipline have long been acknowledged to rest. For how can one test the accuracy of a Latin version made from the Hebrew ? The Hebrew documents are almost unprocurable ; and even if procurable, to how few in the West would they be intelligible ?—but a Latin version made from a Greek source could be readily tested, as Greek was widely understood in the Western Church ; and indeed Jerome's translation of the Gospels had been approved by just such a test, comparison with the Greek having in Augustine's own experience justified nearly all the changes.

The new Latin version is supported, therefore, only by the authority of Jerome himself. But other questions arise in Augustine's mind. Why the many discrepancies, alleged by Jerome, between the Hebrew manuscripts and the Septuagint? Is it not strange that these discrepancies escaped the notice of the Seventy translators and of the other competent translators who came later? And supposing the Seventy did leave these discrepancies, it might surely have been expected that the three subsequent translators, Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, all said to be good Hebrew scholars, would each in his separate version have noticed and corrected them. But it is far otherwise. Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion show many variations of interpretation among themselves, and leave many difficulties unsettled. Can it be believed, then, that with Jerome we have at last reached finality and authority? Augustine tries to put the problem in what he conceives to be its simplest form. The passages in dispute were either obscure or not obscure: if obscure, Jerome is as likely to have been mistaken as were the others: if not obscure, who could credit that the Seventy missed the plain sense? In either case, the presumption is that Jerome is wasting his labour: in difficulties he is only propounding another explanation with no guarantee of its truth, and in the easy parts he can only be repeating what had been adequately done already. With this weighty argument for conservative scholarship and the avoidance of radical investigation, Augustine passes on to a quite different problem.

This second issue is less a matter of scholarship than of interpretation, and here Augustine walks on firmer ground; but again a question of authority is involved. I do not wish to enter into an exposition of their doctrinal differences. I am interested in the men and their way of thought and the clash between their temperaments and attitudes—not in making a precise estimate of their orthodoxy. But it may be worth while to set out the kind of problem about which two eminent Churchmen differed and fought at the end of the fourth century: so I shall try to disentangle the dispute from the mass of quotation and argument in which it is wrapped, and to give the nucleus in plain and objective terms.

It concerns the early part of the Epistle to the Galatians where St. Paul is explaining with much passionate vigour (and a corresponding lack of syntax) how he came to be called as the Apostle to the Gentiles and how he taught that salvation for the Gentiles is solely by faith in the Gospel and quite independent of the Mosaic Law. The primitive Church of the first century consisted broadly of two sections : the one, centred in Jerusalem, comprised the Jewish Christians, who continued to keep the observance of the old Law, not as an essential in their new faith, but rather as an inherited national tradition ; and the other was formed of the growing number of Gentile Christians spread over Syria, Asia Minor and Greece for whom the Law meant nothing. Was the Law to be made generally compulsory for all converts ? That was one of the problems which statesmanship in the Church had to solve soon. The Jewish Christians were naturally disposed to favour the Law ; but through the influence of Paul, it would seem that Peter adopted a more realistic and liberal policy, though he did not carry with him the more extreme members of his party. At any rate, we are told by Paul in the second chapter of Galatians that Peter, paying a visit to the Gentile Christians at Antioch, at first comported himself with a genial absence of fuss, living with his Gentile brethren and eating with them regardless of the Law—until the arrival of an agent or agents from the Judaizing party at Jerusalem, whereupon Peter “ withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the Law ”. “ Dissimulation ” Paul calls it, implying (at least, to Jerome’s mind) that Peter was still a liberal at heart and that this sudden return to strictness was an expedient to placate the legalists. Paul reproached him : “ But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, ‘ If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of the Gentiles and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews ? ’ ” The interpretation of this incident is the second point in the dispute between Augustine and Jerome.

In his commentary on Galatians, Jerome, following Origen, had fastened on the apparent inconsistency of Paul in thus criticizing Peter for an accommodating attitude towards the

Jewish Christians, an attitude which Paul himself had more than once adopted in difficult circumstances towards the same people. To the Jews he had been a Jew and to the Greeks a Greek. Could Holy Scripture, Jerome seems to ask, have really meant to present Paul in so illogical a position? So he seeks another explanation for these occasional changes of front, equally applicable to both Paul and Peter: and he finds it in the theory that they had acted on a concession always allowed to leaders who in moments of crisis must consider the greater good of their organization—what Jerome calls the concession of the *honesta dispensatio*, “the honourable exercise of a wise discretion”, “an expedient flexibility to meet an emergency”. Peter may thus be regarded as being conciliatory to the Jews in order to maintain his authority with them, Paul as attacking Peter’s defection in order to maintain his influence with the Greeks. They understood each other perfectly. But both were working for the greater good of the young Church—to save it from breaking into two openly antagonistic factions.

To Augustine this explanation is execrable: he condemns it as permitting moral obliquity in sacred things. *Honesta dissimulatio*, indeed! He gives it the more downright name of *officiosum mendacium*, “the use of falsehood in the interest of religion”. Will Jerome really defend such a view—that the sacred books contain a falsehood, that a lie may be regarded as sanctioned by Holy Writ, that a writer of Scripture both said at the time and later put it on record that Peter was doing wrong, while privately he believed that Peter was doing right? Once admit this as a principle allowed in the Bible, and there is no end to the possibilities of perverse and mischievous interpretation. For example, says Augustine, we read in the New Testament that Paul approved of marriage: but there exists in the Church a body of extreme ascetics who reject marriage and advocate celibacy and who find this approval inconvenient. What a boon to them if they can now argue, “Oh! but Paul was really in favour of celibacy: he was celibate himself: his approval of marriage was obviously an *officiosum mendacium*, a piece of diplomatic finesse for the major good—to avoid alienating influential husbands among his converts”. By the same principle even the very

praises of the Lord in the Scripture might be interpreted not as genuine worship but as a subtle expedient on the part of enthusiastic believers to kindle the love of God in hearts more phlegmatic. Thus the authority of Scripture will soon be destroyed : for when you quote a weighty passage against a sinner or heretic, he will argue that your passage has no validity, as the writer was uttering a falsehood from an honourable sense of duty ; and there will be opened an illimitable scope for the subjective interpretation of inconvenient truths in the Bible. Augustine therefore insists that Paul gave a true and literal account of what Peter did and what he said ; and he calls on Jerome for a retraction. By a classical parallel he reminds him of the Greek poet Stesichorus who was smitten with blindness after publishing a libel on Helen, and had his eyesight miraculously restored when he wrote a *παλινωδία*, a recantation. He would not call Jerome spiritually blind, but a palinode will at least prove that his eyes are open to the disastrous results that will follow from his theory of the *officiosum mendacium*.

This letter was despatched in the care of Profuturus in 394 or 395. But Profuturus did not complete his journey : he was ordained to a Bishopric in Africa, and died soon afterwards. What became of the original letter we do not know. Augustine himself gives no information. There must have been some gross carelessness ; for it never reached Jerome, and yet within a few years copies of it, unknown to Augustine, were circulating in Rome and Italy. In 397, presuming the first letter to be lost, Augustine sent another in much the same strain.¹ There was no reply to this either. Five years later, in 402, Augustine hears of a rumour, current in Italy, that he had written a book (a book, not a letter) against Jerome. He writes at once to Jerome to deny the report : “ I am told that some brethren have represented to your Charity that I have written a book against you and have sent it to Rome. Please be assured that this is false : before God, I have not done so.”² The assurance was timely and necessary, because Jerome was at that moment engaged in a bitter controversy with his former friend Rufinus on the subject of Origen, part of whose teaching had recently been

¹ Ep. xl.

² Ep. lxxvii.

denounced as heterodox by Pope Anastasius and towards whose memory Jerome was now as vehemently unsparing as he had formerly been devoted. The cannonade of vituperation and argument which these eminent scholars now directed against each other had aroused intense interest throughout Italy; and the last thing Augustine could desire was to be reported as intervening against Jerome in an unbrotherly wrangle which in a later epistle (not perhaps without a little saintly malice) he gravely deploras.¹ His letter of denial at last evokes an answer.² For a man so irascible, Jerome replies with comparative mildness. He accepts Augustine's assurance about the book. There is, however, the question of a letter addressed to him, the original of which had never reached Bethlehem, but only an unsigned copy. It may not be Augustine's though the internal evidence of the style and the reasoning points to him as the author. Jerome has therefore delayed answering the matters raised in it, until assured of its authenticity. Another reason for the delay has been the serious illness of his convert, the devout and venerable lady Paula: during the long periods of watching by her bedside, he had almost forgotten such an irrelevancy as the letter—bearing in mind the verse of Scripture, "Like music in the time of mourning is an unseasonable discourse".³ In any case, he has no desire to attack other men's opinions: he is only concerned to defend his own. The pity is that ambitious young men *will* attack their illustrious seniors as a short cut to glory. But he will not be drawn into a fight. He is an old man. He has had his day. He has earned his repose. He now prefers to sit back and watch the younger contestants. Still, he will not allow Augustine, with his remarks about Stesichorus, to have a monopoly of quoting the poets: so he takes the liberty to remind him of the boxing-match in the Fifth Book of the *Aeneid*, where the veteran Entellus returns for once to the ring and delivers a knock-out blow to the young champion Dares. And let him also remember the common proverb, "The veteran ox it is that steps with surest tread".

Jerome despatched this letter in 402. But before it arrived, Augustine in despair of eliciting a response had composed a third

¹ Ep. lxxiii.

² Ep. lxxviii.

³ *Ecclesiasticus*, xvii. 6.

letter (403) and given it, along with copies of his first two letters, to a deacon named Cyprian, who was going on pilgrimage to the Holy Land.¹ There is nothing new in it. He merely amplifies the reasons for his uneasiness about the new translation of the Old Testament direct from the Hebrew; and, of course, he again begs Jerome to send a full reply “and thus give me, as far as is in your power, the pleasure of your presence”. At last in 404 a reply comes from the pestered and irritated Saint.² It is so characteristic that I have translated (or paraphrased) parts of it: a man like Jerome is still irrepressible.

“You are sending me letter upon letter and repeatedly urging me to answer a certain letter of yours which, as I told you before, reached me only in the form of an unsigned copy. You say you twice sent me this letter by two separate messengers, who for various reasons did not complete the journey. That being so, I am very much surprised to find that this very letter is stated to be common-property in Italy and at Rome—whereas I, the one person to whom it was addressed, am the one person it has never reached. And I am all the more surprised, because my informant says that he came upon it, included with your other published works, not in Africa, not at Hippo, but in a monastery on an Adriatic island some five years ago.

“Genuine friendship cannot co-exist with suspicion: a man must speak with his friend as if with his other self. Some of my acquaintances here . . . have been suggesting to me that your motives in connexion with this letter have been disingenuous, that you have been seeking praise, celebrity, and popular reputation, hoping for self-aggrandizement at my expense, hoping to make the world think that you issued a challenge, but I was afraid to take it up; that you, the trained scholar, are a man of letters, before whom I, the ignoramus, am stricken dumb—having at length found an opponent able to quell my volubility! But in actual fact and speaking frankly, I decided not to send an immediate reply to your Excellency, because I was not absolutely convinced that the letter or (to use an expression sometimes applied in such cases) the honeyed sword, the knife concealed in honey-sweet flatteries, was really yours: and secondly, I

¹ Ep. lxxi.

² Ep. lxxii.

was anxious to avoid the appearance of sending to a bishop of my own Church a provocative answer, criticizing various points in my critic's letter, particularly as I judged parts of it to be tainted with heresy ; and lastly, I forebore to write, because I could not endure the thought of your just reproaches, if I had accused you in the wrong.

“ Wherefore, as I said to you before, either send me the letter in question, subscribed with your own hand ; or cease this challenging of an old man who in the obscurity of his cell shuns publicity. If you wish to display or to exercise your learning, seek opponents of your own age, young men eloquent and distinguished, of whom I am told there are plenty at Rome, strong enough and bold enough to face you, and of just the weight and size to meet a bishop in a debate on Holy Scripture. As for me, a soldier once, now a veteran—it is my place to applaud your victories and other men's victories, not with my worn body to go on active service again. I hesitate to quote a certain famous parallel from Roman history—but, if you continue pressing me to reply, I may perhaps recall how the sheer staying power of old Quintus Fabius Maximus wore down and broke young Hannibal's arrogant confidence in victory.” He adds a series of dry shrewd questions about the supposed loss of the letter, promises to consider a reply when he knows whom to answer, and indicates that though he has only a slight acquaintance with a very few of Augustine's works he could find in them some things *quae a recti linea discrepare videantur*. He then concludes : “ Farewell, my dear friend, my son in years, my father in ecclesiastical rank ; and do me the favour of remembering one rule—to arrange that whatever you write me in future should reach me first ”.

The preliminaries of the dispute are now over. Augustine had issued, and repeated, his challenge. The old warrior in Bethlehem would prefer not to fight, partly because he has battles enough on his hands, partly because he will not gratify a seemingly ambitious young man who is measuring himself against a senior ; and, besides, he will be wasting his effort if he strikes precipitately at the wrong person. So he growls from his cave with a kind of grim imperturbability in which, however,

there is a tone of warning and menace. Augustine on his side is relentlessly conciliatory but determined. He believes his criticisms to have been well-founded and honest: he had no ulterior motives, no wish for mere victory or importance: his sole aim is knowledge. So he deprecates the suspicion that he is attacking a great man in order to win a quick notoriety. Why should it be thought impossible for two men of the same faith to discuss questions of doctrine without animus and distrust? The ideal he seeks is the communion of minds in the passionless atmosphere of the intellect, from which the irrelevancies of human emotion and vanity are excluded and where the mind's energy is entirely directed towards finding Truth. It was vain to hope for this in a discussion with Jerome.

In 404 Augustine writes a reply¹ to Jerome's first letter. Again there is much conciliation, and here and there a sharpening of tone. He apologizes for the mistake about the letter. "I confess my fault as having been the first to offend by writing that letter which I cannot deny to be mine. Why should I try to swim against the stream and not rather ask pardon? I therefore entreat you by the mercy of Christ to forgive me if I injured you." As a sign of his penitence he takes up Jerome's reference to the veteran ox and works it out in a long analogy of the ox treading out the corn on the threshing-floor: "Since you are, by your own description, a veteran ox, worn out perhaps in body by reason of age, but unimpaired in vigour of mind, and still toiling strenuously and with profit in the Lord's threshing-floor: lo! here I am, as corn for threshing; if I have spoken amiss, plant your foot firmly upon me: the heavy weight of your venerable age must prove salutary, if the chaff of my error is pounded and separated from me".

Once satisfied that Augustine had written the offending letter, Jerome wasted no time. His reply² was already on its way in 404. It is a vigorous and sometimes angry piece of polemical argument, dictated extempore, he explains, and therefore perhaps lacking in method, but showing clearly in attack and defence that the author was an artful and experienced fighter. I do not propose, either in this letter or in Augustine's final answer, to do more than

¹ Ep. lxxiii.

² Ep. lxxv.

indicate the main themes : the theological details would now only obscure the issue and dim the picture of the two men which to me is much more interesting.

Jerome quickly comes to the Commentary on Galatians, which he maintains to have been not an original work, but, in the accepted literary convention, a compilation of the material he had collected from extensive reading in Origen and other Greek commentators, the whole hastily put together with occasional additions of his own and published in Latin for the information of the Latin Church. Augustine, he says, might have known this if he had read the preface, and might have hesitated to blame Jerome for statements which had been advanced, again in the literary convention of the times, only as possible and alternative explanations of difficult passages. Certainly the idea of the *honesta dispensatio* came from Origen : but it had been accepted by all the later Greek writers, and in such good company Jerome had no doubts about accepting it too ; but he would be prepared to accept a better theory, if Augustine can produce it.

Was Paul inconsistent in rebuking Peter for dissimulation ? To prove this, it was necessary to examine Paul's history from his conversion onwards ; and this he proceeds to do in the manner of an examining counsel—reading out incident after incident from Scripture, questioning an imaginary Paul about them, evoking the required answers, apostrophizing him with ironical surprise, suggesting motives, all intended to show that in relation to the Jewish Law Paul had so often practised the very dissimulation for which he blamed Peter, that no theory but Origen's offered any intelligible solution. But Augustine had denied that in this occasional conforming to Jewish Law Paul was dissimulating : according to Augustine, he was only making a kindly gesture to the Jewish Christians whom he would allow to practise their traditional ritual, provided no one mistook it for an essential to salvation. Jerome here professes to detect in Augustine a lapse towards heresy. O shame ! to tolerate the existence of the Law side by side with the Gospel—the old heresy of the Ebionites, the recent heresy of the Nazarenes ! . . . “ I therefore beseech you, who imagine yourself called upon to heal my slight wound which is not more than a prick or scratch from a

needle, to use your medical skill in healing this gaping wound of heresy in yourself, this deep wound which looks as though made by the thrust of a lance or a heavy pike. For there is surely no comparison, no proportion, between my guilt who only set out the various opinions held by the Fathers on a disputed passage, and your guilt who re-introduce into the Church a most pestilential heresy."

But he makes his most spectacular stroke in replying to the criticism of his translation from the Hebrew. Augustine had said, "The disputed passages of which the Seventy have given an interpretation were either obscure or not obscure; if obscure, you are as likely to have been mistaken as the others; if not obscure, the Seventy could not possibly be mistaken". Jerome now applies what he calls "this novel syllogism" to Augustine's own exposition of the Psalms, naming nine eminent commentators whose work had dealt with the entire book of Psalms and must therefore have included all passages, both the obscure and the not obscure. How was it that in some of his explanations Augustine differed from them? In obscurities is he not as likely to be mistaken as the others? In plain passages is it credible that these competent nine could have been mistaken? It would seem that Augustine had been losing his labour; and indeed by applying this principle we would reach a general paralysis of all effort, a perpetual stasis in which no one would ever speak or write of any subject which had ever been treated before!

There remains now only one major point to be answered—the principles on which Jerome is making his translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew. Here the scholar in Jerome speaks with a certain intolerance of the critic who has no conception of what the work means. Of course there are no diacritical signs in the new version: these appeared in the earlier version only because they were carried over from Origen's critical text of the LXX which he was then following; but now in translating from the Hebrew he is not trying to give verbal equivalents but to render the sense. "As to the principles that should be followed in translating the Scriptures, they are set out in my treatise 'The Best Mode of Translating'¹ and in the introductions to the

¹ Hieron., Ep. lvii (ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi).

various parts of my new version, and I feel it is enough to refer the thoughtful reader to them. If, as you state, my revised version of the New Testament has your approval and support as having been critically examined by many readers with a knowledge of Greek, you ought to have credited me with the same scrupulous honesty in dealing with the Old Testament; for I have not concocted a fictitious version from my own imagination: I have translated the sacred words in the exact sense I found them to have among speakers of Hebrew: if you query anything, test it by asking the Jews."

The last letter I shall touch on is Augustine's reply, written in 405—a very long, closely reasoned statement of his views.¹ There is little rhetoric or dialectical finesse; the issue is too serious for that. One feels that a great mind has drawn together all its powers and is putting forth all its strength, with a grave courteous friendliness which, however, never relaxes the stern force of the logical argument. He apologizes for the letter that had gone astray. He admits that his reference to Stesichorus had been made *ineptius quam litteratius*. He deprecates Jerome's perhaps excessive sensitiveness about his episcopal rank and invites his criticism, for *in multis rebus Augustinus Hieronymo minor est*. But, still, he must claim a certain independence of judgement in discussions even with such an eminent scholar as Jerome: he cannot surrender his right to use frankness of speech in an honest argument: otherwise, he would merely be submitting to authority—and that is a deference he reserves for the Canonical Scriptures alone: "for I most firmly believe that the authors of these were in every respect free from error; and, if ever in these writings I shall find anything which seems contrary to truth, I shall not question but that the manuscript is faulty or that the translator has missed the true sense or that I myself have completely misunderstood. In reading other books I go on the principle that, no matter how pre-eminent in holiness or in doctrine the writers may be, I do not accept a thing as true because they thought it to be true but only because on the evidence of Scripture or by logical argument they have brought home to me an opinion not discordant with truth." In this

¹ Ep. lxxxii.

confession of his criteria we come to the root of the matter. Granting an absolute authority to the Canonical Scriptures, he is bound to resist any theory or interpretation suggesting the possibility of a false statement in them. To him, Jerome's interpretation of Galatians seems to threaten their unquestionable and universal truth; and, though he does not say so explicitly, this is doubtless the reason why he hesitates to accept Jerome's new translation from the Hebrew; for this version rests on one man's authority; but the Septuagint, produced (as he believes) by a divinely guided concord and later approved by the Apostles, he venerates as *sanctam scripturam in summo et caelesti auctoritatis culmine collocatam*. There can be no question but that this was his view of the Septuagint, for long afterwards he reverts to the subject in the *City of God* (xviii, 42-44) and restates his belief with a finality that is no palinode.

ABŪ'L-HASAN AL-ṢŪRĪ'S DISCOURSE ON THE RULES OF LEPROSY IN THE KITĀB AL-ṬABBĀKH, RYLANDS SAMARITAN CODEX IX

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THERE is a fundamental difference in the conception of the Biblical requirements for Levitical purity between Rabbinic Judaism and the Jewish Sects. According to the Rabbis, Levitical purity is demanded only as a condition for entering the Sanctuary or for handling consecrated objects. In essence an Israelite would be permitted to defile himself by contacting unclean things, and except in the case of the dead (Lev. xxi. 1) even a priest would be allowed to do so.¹ According to most sectarians, however, including Samaritans and Karaites, Levitical purity is an absolute requirement and any kind of defilement is a transgression in itself.² For this reason Rabbinical codes intended as a practical guide for the Jews in the Diaspora, in contrast to sectarian codes, do not contain the rules for Levitical purity at all. This applies, in particular, to the case of leprosy which, apart from falling under the heading of Levitical purity, requires for its diagnosis a priest of the sons of Aaron, according to Lev. xiii. 2, although both Jews and Karaites agree that the priests of post-Talmudical times are not of traceable descent and that therefore the rules of leprosy find no application in practice.³

The Samaritans alone are outstanding among Jewish sects in their claim to the knowledge of the exact genealogy of their priests⁴ and in giving practical application to their rules

¹ See *Sifra*, *ad loc.*

² Cp. the writer's, *Saadya Gaon's Arabic Version of the Pentateuch*, in *Saadya Studies* (Manchester, 1943), pp. 235 f.

³ Cp. L. Ginzberg, *Geniza Studies*, vol. i, pp. 71 f; vol. ii, pp. 429 f.

⁴ See M. Gaster, *J.R.A.S.*, April, 1909; J. Ben-Zwi, *Sefer Ha-Shomronim*, p. 255.

of leprosy.¹ This gives to the comparison of the Jewish and Samaritan rules of leprosy a special interest. The great Samaritan authority Abū'l-Ḥasan Al-Ṣūrī² in his *Kitāb Al-Ṭabbākh*³ has a detailed and elaborate discourse on the rules of leprosy,³ of which a short summary regarding the definition and regulations of the three types of plague, Rising, Bright Spot and Scab, mentioned in Lev. xiii. 1-17 must suffice here :—

(1) *Rising* is a boil which rises above the level of the surrounding area of flesh. It has three tokens of uncleanness : bright whiteness, quick raw flesh—which means that within the whiteness there are spots of the colour of the adjoining part of the body—and white hair.

(2) *Bright Spot* is a depression below the level of the surrounding area of the flesh. It has three tokens of uncleanness : deepness, bright whiteness and white hair.

(3) *Scab* is a boil within an excoriation. If it has no white hair it requires 7 days' segregation. If after 7 days no change is noticeable, the person so afflicted is declared clean after another 7 days' observation. If, however, after this period either white hairs appear or an extension or contraction is noticeable, the person is declared unclean.

Abū'l-Ḥasan adds further a method of diagnosis for which he does not claim Scriptural basis. If by squeezing the boil blood flows into it, the person is clean. If, however, the blood accumulates around the boil the person is unclean. The explanation being that leprosy is caused by phlegm and black bile combining into a boil which prevents the circulation of the blood and therefore of heat in that spot. If, however, it is noticed that, on squeezing, blood flows through the boil, it is a sign of the existence of normal body heat and health.

In contradistinction to Abū'l-Ḥasan, who identifies Biblical leprosy with various types of ulcerous boils, the Rabbis see in

¹ Cp. Ben-Zwi, *loc cit.*, p. 156.

² On the time of this author cp. the present writer's *Abū'l-Ḥasan Al-Ṣūrī*, etc., BULLETIN OF THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY, October, 1946.

³ A detailed description of the MS. of this work is given by Professor Edward Robertson, "Catalogue of the Samaritan MSS. in the John Rylands Library," pp. 110 *seq.*, 1938.

leprosy a variety of eczema. In their definition of the relevant terms they refer solely to colour: bright spot is the whiteness of snow, rising is the whiteness of white wool, whereas the word *sapaḥat*, which is usually translated by scab, they derive from the root *sph*, to attach, meaning "secondary", i.e. secondary in colour to either bright spot, when it is the colour of lime, or to rising, when it is white like the membrane surrounding the white of an egg.¹

These fundamental differences between the Jews and Samaritans concerning the rules of leprosy, as well as others, which will be mentioned later, all seem to have originated in a single variant between the reading of the MT and the Sam. Pentateuch.

The central problem is the principle underlying the arrangement in Lev. xiii. 1-17, which deals with the rules of the leprosy of the skin. The section is introduced by vv. 1-2, which state that three types of plague of the skin have to be shown to the priest. They are mentioned in the following order: (1) Rising (2) Scab and (3) Bright Spot. V. 3 follows this up and, without specifying to which of the three plagues it refers, gives two symptoms which confirm uncleanness, viz. that the hair in the plague is turned white and that the plague in sight is deeper than the skin. Vv. 4-6, which deal with the alternative case where the aforementioned two symptoms are not present, refer specifically to the Bright Spot. They order the person thus afflicted to be segregated first for seven days, and, if the plague has by then neither changed in appearance nor increased in size, to be segregated for a further seven days. If it is found then that the plague has darkened in appearance, it has proved to be a Scab and the person is pronounced clean. Vv. 7-8 continue by stating that if the Scab should increase in size after the person has been pronounced clean, it is a symptom of leprosy and the person is declared unclean. V. 9 is again introductory and is similar to v. 2 in ordering the person afflicted with a plague to come before the priest. It reads: "When a plague of leprosy shall be in a man, then he shall be brought unto the priest". Vv. 10-11 refer to the 'Rising' and state that if it be

white "and it should have turned the hair white, and (ו, which can also mean 'or') there be quick raw flesh" in it, it is an old leprosy and the person shall be pronounced unclean. Vv. 12-13 state that if the leprosy should come to a head and cover "all the skin of the plague (stricken) from his head to his foot", he shall be pronounced clean of leprosy. Vv. 14-17 state that if the quick raw flesh appears again he shall be unclean, but if it changes again to white he shall be pronounced clean again.

At first sight it seems that vv. 3-17 discuss the three types of plague mentioned in the introductory vv. 1-2 in a reversed order; vv. 10-17 referring to the Rising, vv. 7-8 to the Scab and vv. 4-6 to the Bright Spot. As to v. 3, it could be considered as an alternative case to that dealt with in vv. 4-6, referring similarly to the Bright Spot although this is not expressly mentioned. According to this interpretation, we would have to assume that the symptoms of uncleanness mentioned in connexion with each individual plague refer to that plague alone: white hair to the Bright Spot, spreading to the Scab, and white hair combined with quick flesh to the Rising.

The major difficulty in this interpretation is that v. 9 is introductory, separating vv. 10-17 from the preceding verses. It was apparently for this reason that the Rabbis refused to see in vv. 3-17 a division according to the three types of plague mentioned in vv. 1-2. According to them,¹ v. 3, which does not mention any particular type of plague, refers to all three kinds of plague mentioned in v. 2 without distinction. Since, however, vv. 4-6 deal with the alternative case to that of v. 3 and refer expressly to the Bright Spot, the question remained as to why the ruling for such case was omitted in connexion with the remaining two types of plague. This led the Rabbis to the conclusion that the arrangement in vv. 3-17 is according to the three symptoms of uncleanness: white hair, vv. 3-6; spreading, vv. 7-8; quick raw flesh, vv. 10-17. The three symptoms have equal bearing on all the three types of plague; each of them, however, is mentioned in connexion with the type in which its presence is more common. Similarly, vv. 4-6 mention particularly the

¹ The view of the Rabbis as to the interpretation of Lev. xiii. 1-17 is found in *Sifra*, *ad loc.*

Bright Spot, because the absence of all three symptoms is more common in that type of plague. As a result of this interpretation the Rabbis had to take the symptoms of white hair and quick raw flesh in v. 10 as two alternatives, for according to v. 3 white hair alone is a conclusive symptom in all three types of plague.

A further consequence of the Rabbis' view concerns the interpretation of the phrase "all the skin of the plague" in vv. 12-13. Taking these words to refer solely to the case mentioned explicitly in vv. 10-11, where the man was pronounced unclean on account of a Rising which had in it quick raw flesh, they could be explained literally to mean that if subsequently the whole of the rising turned white, whereby the symptoms of the quick flesh disappeared, he is clean. The Rabbis, however, who maintained that vv. 10-11, and consequently vv. 12-13, refer to all three types of plague, could not take these words literally, since a bright spot, e.g. although entirely white, requires segregation according to vv. 4-6. They, therefore, had to interpret the words "all the skin of the plague" to mean "all the skin of *him that has* the plague"; i.e. that although a single white spot in the skin was a symptom of uncleanness, if it spread over the whole body it becomes a token of cleanness.

But the most far-reaching consequences arose from the Rabbis' interpretation of the expressions "the appearance deeper than the skin" in vv. 3, 20, 25, 30, "the appearance not deeper than the skin" in vv. 4, 21, 26, 31, 32, 34, "the rising" in vv. 10, 43, which accompany the word 'white' in dealing with the various types of plague. The simple explanation seems to be that we have in each case two distinct symptoms: the visible white, in which all types of plague participate equally, and the tangible, which depends on the nature of the sore, and differs thus in being deep, level, or rising according to the three types of plague. Once, however, we assume that the arrangement in vv. 3-17 is according to the various symptoms, and that each symptom applies equally to all types of plague, the existence of tangible symptoms is inadmissible, since it is clear that a rising, for instance, which is perceptible by touch cannot be thought to be in one case higher and in another deeper than the skin. The Rabbis, therefore, had to regard the expressions "deeper than the

skin", "not deeper than the skin", and "rising" not as independent symptoms but as merely defining the symptom 'white' in its various shades. The optical appearance of the plague being deeper or higher in relation to the normal colour of the skin according to the brighter or duller shade of whiteness.

To summarize: Influenced by the M.T., where v. 9 forms a new introduction, the Rabbis held that vv. 3-17 are arranged according to the three symptoms and not according to the types of plague mentioned in vv. 1-2. These symptoms apply to all plagues without distinction. The basic symptom is whiteness in some of its shades. This alone, however, requires only segregation for observation, while uncleanness is definitely pronounced only after the additional appearance of one of the following three symptoms, white hair, quick raw flesh and spreading. The person thus declared unclean resumes the state of cleanness again with disappearance of all the above symptoms or with the spreading of the whiteness over the whole body.

The Samaritan approach to the problem is already indicated by the sequence in which Abū'l-Ḥasan discusses the various plagues, which follows the order in which they are mentioned in Lev. xiii. 2. This suggests that he considers vv. 3-17 as commenting on v. 2. The difficulty that v. 9 is a new introduction did not present itself to the Samaritans in the same way as it did to the Rabbis since the Sam. Pent. varies from the M.T. and begins v. 9 with the conjunctive *vav*. This turns the verse from a complete and independent sentence into the protasis of a conditional sentence which is connected with v. 2 and which has its apodosis in v. 10. The verse has to be translated "If a plague of leprosy was in a man and he had been brought to the priest," etc.

The verses are divided strictly according to the three types of plague, each with its specific symptoms and rules. Verse 3 deals with the Bright Spot. Its tangible symptom is depth and to declare it unclean the addition of two other symptoms is required, bright white colour and white hair. Vv. 4-8 deal with the Scab. This consists of the white sore formed in an excoriation and requires segregation for the purpose of observation. It is adjudged unclean by the addition of the two

symptoms, whiteness combined with either change of size of the plague or with white hair. Vv. 9-17 treat of the Rising. Its tangible symptom is elevation and to declare it unclean the addition of three other symptoms is required: white hair, bright whiteness, and spots of the colour of the adjoining part of the body within the whiteness. If these spots, however, turn bright white the person concerned is declared clean.