

NICODEMUS AND THE NICOLAITANS.

BY PRESERVED SMITH.

ANY commentary on the Apocalypse, any book of reference with an article on the Nicolaitans, will tell us that these people were a Christian sect professing Gnosticism; most of the authorities will add that the Nicolaitans were Greek philosophizers of Christianity, who perhaps advocated syncretism and who were certainly guilty of fornication and eating meats sacrificed to idols.¹ Confusion is introduced into the matter by the circumstance that later sects which originally had nothing to do with the primitive Nicolaitans, were given their name. (Even the Familists, founded by Henry Niclaes in the sixteenth century, were thus branded.) The Nicolaitans to whom Epiphanius belonged, and who, he says, worshiped Barbelo, could hardly have been the same as those known to the author of the Apocalypse.² Other traditions about them are that they were Ophites and that they were founded by Nicholas of Antioch.³ This last statement has been accepted by some writers and is not impossible.⁴ All we know of this Nicholas is that he was a proselyte of Antioch (Acts. vi. 5). If true, this fact tells us nothing about the sect. Other statements in the early writers (e. g., Irenæus: *Adversus Haereses*, I, 23) tell us little of value about the Nicolaitans of the Apocalypse.

It is therefore to that work itself, chapter ii, that we must turn for all that we really know about them. Let us begin by quoting verses 14 and 15, addressed to the angel of the church in Pergamos:

"But I have against thee a few things, that thou hast there those that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

¹ Of the many authorities I have consulted I cite only: *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*; *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, s. v. "Häretiker"; Ramsay: *Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 201; F. Legge: *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity*, 1915, Vol. II, p. 1.

² Epiphanius: *Haer.*, capp. XXV, XXVI, Oehler, Vol. II, Part I, pp. 160, 184.

³ Augustine: *De Haeresibus*, cap. XVII, Oehler, Vol. I, p. 200; Pseudo-Tertullian: *Adversus omnes Haereses*, capp. V, VI, Oehler, p. 273; Pseudo-Jerome: *Indiculus de Haeresibus*, cap. III, Oehler, p. 285. See Legge, *op. cit.*, p. 25; De Faye: *Gnosticisme*, Index.

⁴ E. g., Zahn: *Introduction to the New Testament* (English translation), Vol. II, p. 110.

"So thou hast likewise those that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans."

It is on the basis of these two verses that the commentators have assumed that the Nicolaitans were the same as the Balaamites, and that they were guilty of idolatry of some sort. But in my judgment the verses show plainly exactly the opposite, namely that the writer was dealing with two separate sects. Would it not have been absurd to refer under different names and headings to one and the same body? One might as well infer from a Democratic campaign speech, directed against both Republicans and Progressives, that both of the latter were the same party. One might as well say that because Luther wrote with equal force against Catholics and Anabaptists that *they* were the same people. Our conclusion that the Nicolaitans were not the Balaamites is confirmed by a careful examination of what is said of the heresies in the other churches. Let us take them in turn.

The early history of the church of Ephesus is as well known as is that of any of the primitive communities. First came Apollos (Acts xviii. 24), preaching not Christianity but the baptism of John, a Messianic sect that later partly merged in the Christian but, as we know from allusions in the Gospel of John, still flourished at Ephesus as a separate body in the second century. These Ephesian Baptists have left us a precious document in the Odes of Solomon.⁵ It is quite probable that the *Fragments of a Zadokite Work* recently discovered, are by the same sect, though from a different community.⁶ In the year 52 Paul came to Ephesus (Acts xvii. 19; xix. 1) and converted some of the Disciples of John. Now the writer of the Letters to the Seven Churches (which may date from the reign of Nero though the Apocalypse as a whole took form in the last decade of the first century), writes from the Jewish-Christian standpoint. He abominates Paul as the bringer-in of heathen mysteries.⁷ The allusion in this letter to Ephesus to "those which say they are apostles and are not" can only refer to Paul, as he was the only one outside of the Twelve and Matthias who, as far as we know, ever took this designation. There may have been others,

⁵ "The Disciples of John and the Odes of Solomon," *The Monist*, April, 1915.

⁶ G. Margoliouth in *The Expositor*, Dec., 1911; *ibid.*, March, 1912. R. H. Charles dissents but has not convinced me.

⁷ That the Apocalypse has an anti-Pauline polemic is maintained by Köstlin, Baur, Schwegler, Holtzmann, Renan, Hilgenfeld, Hausrath, and denied by Neander, Ritschl, B. Weiss, Gebhard, Weizsäcker, J. Weiss, and Ramsay. I regard it as probable.

but, as Paul had been at Ephesus, the allusion best fits him. This is what the writer means also in saying that Ephesus "left her first love." From Jewish-Christians they had become "symmystæ of Paul," as Ignatius later called them. That there really was a reaction against Paul at Ephesus at this time is clearly indicated in Acts xx. 17 and 1 Timothy i. It is not really contradictory for the writer of the letter to say that Ephesus had left her first love and yet hated the Paulinists. She had done so for a time, but had returned and now wins the writer's approval. Now, when he has completely finished with the section dealing with Paul, the writer adds: "Thou hatest the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." As the Apocalypse arose in an Ephesian atmosphere, it is quite natural that the hatred of the church of Ephesus for the sect should be shared by the author. From this we cannot learn what the Nicolaitans' works were; but I maintain that it is distinctly indicated that they were not identical with the Gentile heresy of Paul.

The only spiritual evil from which Smyrna suffered was "the blasphemy of those that say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan." This might be applied to either the followers of Paul, who had completely deserted Judaism, or to the Jewish-Christians, who recognized a certain excellence in Christ and followed His teachings to some extent, but insisted on still calling themselves Jews. That there actually were such Jews is plain from various references in the New Testament, to be canvassed later, and perhaps also from the Zadokite work, in which John the Baptist is regarded as the Messiah and Christ as merely a teacher of righteousness. That the allusion in the Apocalypse, ii. 9, is really to the latter type of heresy is made probable by some words in Ignatius's Epistle to the Magnesians (X, 3), "It is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practise Judaism." Now in the other Letters to the Churches there are two types of heresy mentioned, which may be conveniently designated as the Gentile and the Jewish. If this refers to the latter, it is evidently similar to, if not identical with, that of the Nicolaitans. Here we get the first positive evidence of what they were like. They were Jews who would not come out decisively for Christ.

Pergamos, in the verses already quoted, is charged with harboring Balaamites and Nicolaitans. Balaam was the type of false prophet, used in the late Jewish Talmud to conceal references to Jesus. The name is also used in Jude 11, and 2 Peter ii. 14, as designating a false prophet, though there is no good reason for assert-

ing, as Knopf^s and others have done, that these letters therefore combat the Nicolaitan heresy. This is to fall into the error, exposed above, of supposing that the Nicolaitans were the Balaamites. The Balaamites were Paulinists, for Paul taught that things sacrificed to idols were nothing (1 Cor. viii). The "fornication" here was probably spiritual fornication, i. e., idolatry, as often in the Old Testament. Paul (1 Cor. x. 8), however, and Josephus (*Antiquities*, IV, 6, 5) apparently took it literally.

Thyatira was afflicted with only one of the two types of heresy mentioned, that of the Gentiles. The sect was led by a woman called "Jezebel," who in all probability was Lydia the convert of Paul (Acts xvi. 14, 40). Jezebel was also a typical name (applied later, e. g., to Catharine de' Medici), but here it seems to have a special *à propos*. Jezebel was the opponent of Elijah; this woman was the opponent of the Disciples of John the Baptist, thought of as Elijah redivivus. It is probable that the Baptists had a community here, which, like that at Ephesus, was partly or wholly turned aside to the Pauline Christianity, just at the time that Lydia disappeared from Philippi. The author of the Apocalypse does not write as a Disciple of John, but he has considerable respect for their point of view, as is shown, for example, by the numerous thoughts and phrases common to the Odes of Solomon and the Book of Revelation.

Nothing notable in this connection is said to Sardis. Philadelphia is troubled by the "synagogue of Satan which say they are Jews and are not."

Laodicea is cursed for being lukewarm. What the writer hates above all things is the tepidity that is neither hot nor cold. It was probably the same quality in the Nicolaitans that disgusted him; they wanted to be both Jews *and* Christians. Laodicea plumed herself on her riches, probably spiritual riches. Paul apparently makes an allusion to the same state of mind in the letter to the Colossians (ii. 1, 2), sent by him with an epistle to Laodicea (Col. iv. 16).

We have now exhausted the references to the Nicolaitans, and have shown that probably they were Jews who would not come out strongly for Christ, but were rather lukewarm. Their name shows that they were founded by a Nicholas, and it is not impossible that he was the deacon mentioned in Acts vi. 5, though nothing further can be inferred from this.

^s Rud. Knopf: *Die Briefe Petri und Judä völlig neu bearbeitet*, 1912.

Can we discover this Nicholas anywhere else in the Bible? I believe we find him again in the Nicodemus of the Fourth Gospel. I regard the following points as established: The Fourth Gospel was written at Ephesus early in the second century. It does not rest on independent tradition of the life of Jesus, but entirely on the Synoptics. The author, however, worked over their material to suit his own philosophy, and also to meet the special needs of his age. It is therefore probable that his book contains allusions to contemporary conditions at Ephesus, and this has actually been recognized in certain cases. Baldensperger, Debelius, Bacon, and others have agreed that the Gospel contains plain allusions to the Disciples of John, who, as we have seen, were a strong sect at Ephesus. In my article on "The Disciples of John and the Odes of Solomon" (*The Monist*, April, 1915) I have shown that other questions of local importance are discussed in the Fourth Gospel. E. g., the discourse in the fourth chapter as to the proper place to worship God, is also found in the Odes (No. IV)—an Ephesian product—and was therefore probably a burning question at this time and place. Even the Logos is an Ephesian production, appearing first in the philosophy of Heraclitus. Other local references can be found, I am sure, by studying the works of Ignatius and Irenæus.

That the author of the Fourth Gospel moved in the same circle of ideas as the author of the Apocalypse has often been noticed, and is proved by the common emphasis on the Logos, the Lamb of God, the prophecy "They shall look on him they have pierced," and other resemblances. That the author of the Gospel should have found Nicholas and his Nicolaitans attacked in the Apocalypse and should have given his own estimate to correct it, is thoroughly characteristic. Thus he corrected Matthew xi. 14, by denying that John the Baptist was Elias (John i. 21). Thus, throughout his Gospel, he rescued the disciple John from the subordinate place he had taken in the Synoptics. Thus he omitted the eucharistic account of the Last Supper, which he disliked as a Pauline, heathen mystery, and substituted for it his sermon on the spiritual bread (John vi) and the washing of the Disciples' feet. Thus, in brief, he went over all his material, freely altering to bring it into agreement with his own standpoint.

Now where did he get Nicodemus? There is no such name, and no character precisely like him in the Synoptics. Loisy (*Quatrième Evangile*, pp. 303ff) finds John's source in Mark x. 17. Bacon says he is a combination of the rich ruler (Luke xviii. 18),

Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. xxv. 30ff), and Gamaliel (Acts v. 34ff). To a certain extent I agree with these scholars, but I do not think that these sources are sufficient for the whole of the Johannine account of Nicodemus. I certainly agree with the many scholars who see in Nicodemus the type of a cultivated, distinguished Jew, who has an impression of Jesus's significance, but cannot bring himself quite to a whole-hearted adoption of the new teaching, "to be born again" in fact.

My thesis is that the original of this type was the Nicholas who founded the Nicolaitans. Nicodemus is the Naq Dimon of Talmudic tradition, celebrated for his wealth and for having provided baths for purifying pilgrims to the Temple. But this story is entirely based on the New Testament, partly on the passages in John, partly on Mark x. 17, 22; xii. 28-34; xv. 42-46. Now as *δημος* and *λαός* both mean "people," Nicodemus is the exact equivalent of Nicolaos in meaning and in quantity (a matter to which, in the substitution of names, the ancients paid heed). It is true that the name Nicodemus occurs elsewhere and is not therefore necessarily fictitious. But it is possibly fictitious and derived from Nicolaos, just as "Lesbia" in Catullus's songs stood for "Clodia," even though the name "Lesbia" occurs elsewhere. The object of the author of the Fourth Gospel both in changing the name and in keeping the substitute close enough to be recognizable is plain. Consistently with dramatic verisimilitude he could hardly introduce the name of a recent heretic as that of a companion of Jesus, and yet he wanted those who could read between the lines to be able to guess to what special type he was alluding. This introduction of later persons and events into the fabric of the Gospels was no new thing. The story of the storm on the lake and of Peter's walking on the water, is probably an allegory of the early trials of the Roman church.⁹ A great many examples of similar slight changes of the name might be cited as parallels. Thus the poet Greene referred to Shakespeare in 1592 as "one who thought himself the only Shakescene in the country." Thus the writer of 2 Samuel changed the name of Saul's son Ish-baal (man of Baal; cf. 1 Chronicles viii. 33) to Ish-bosheth (man of shame; 2 Samuel ii. 8).

The character of Nicodemus is plainly indicated in John iii. 1-21. He came to Jesus by night, just as the timid Jews who dared not avow their faith undoubtedly came to the Christian conventicles by night. Jesus tells him that he must whole-heartedly enter on a new life (be born again) if he is to be saved. Again (vii. 50ff)

⁹ Mark vi. 45ff; Matt. xiv. 22ff; Loisy: *L'Évangile selon Marc*, 1912, p. 201.

Nicodemus advised his countrymen not to reject Jesus before hearing Him, and they answered by accusing him of being a Galilean. Finally, Nicodemus is brought into the narrative once again as contributing an enormous quantity of myrrh and aloes to Christ's burial (xix. 39). This may indicate that the rich Jews who were only semi-Christians contributed largely in a financial way to the poor Christians.

If there is anything in the theses here presented the historical reconstruction would be as follows. There actually lived, in Ephesus or Pergamos, or at any rate in that region, a certain Nicolaos, who may or may not have been the Nicholas the deacon and proselyte of Antioch mentioned in Acts. He taught that a man might be a Christian while still remaining a Jew, no startling doctrine in those days when we know that many men thought the same. By the reign of Nero, however, when persecution had broken out, and the distinction between Jew and Christian had been emphasized by Paul, his followers became odious to those who felt themselves primarily Christians, even though they may, like the John of the Apocalypse, have detested the new-fangled Gentile Christianity of Paul. The author of Revelation denounced them with the unqualified hatred that he had for all but his own stripe, but when the more tolerant and loving Ephesian Evangelist came to write, he regarded them with more forbearance and tried to show in his book how such an attitude as that of Nicolaos and his disciples was at least psychologically comprehensible. For obvious reasons he concealed his defense of him under the exactly equivalent name of Nicodemus.

A NEW DISCOVERY REGARDING NAZARETH.

BY A. KAMPMEIER.

AS is well known, doubts have been expressed for some time regarding the existence of Nazareth in the first century. The writer's belief in its existence has never been overthrown thus far, not because of sentimental or traditional, but for quite sound and valid reasons, which I will not repeat here as I have expressed them to a large extent in my article "Nazareth, Nazorean and Jesus" (*The Open Court*, XXIV, pp. 375 ff).

The doubts concerning the existence of Nazareth, shown by some scholars, have been made use of especially by Dr. William Benjamin Smith, in his theory denying the historical character of