

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE ORIGIN OF THE LEGEND OF BOS ET ASINUS.

It is not always possible to trace back the legends which have clustered around the life of Jesus, to their sources. I believe, though, that I have succeeded in finding the origin of the legend of *Bos et Asinus*, and it might surprise some of my readers to learn that a wilful or at any rate ignorant corruption of the biblical text is responsible for this legend. The prophecy that the Messiah was to be born *in medio duorum animalium* is to be found in the breviary in the *Responsorium to Lectio vi., In ii. Nocturno, In Circumcisione Domini* and is ascribed by the author of the Alsfeld Passion play of the year 1501 (verses 4859-4862) to the prophet Habakkuk. While engaged on my essay on the prophet scenes in the medieval religious drama¹ this pseudo-biblical prophecy caused me great trouble, for I was unable to find the passage in the Bible to which it might be traced back. In this German essay I had undertaken to find the corresponding biblical passages for the prophetic sayings in the medieval German church plays. The Vulgate version of the Book of Habakkuk does not contain these words. Prof. Wilhelm Meyer in his book *Carmina Burana*² also calls attention to this pseudo-biblical passage in the Alsfeld play and traces it back to a medieval pseudo-Augustinian sermon, *Contra Judacos et Paganos*, XIII. The passage, however, is much older and was already contained in the Itala translation of the Bible from where it was brought over through the prayer-book into the mystery plays,³ and rests on a false vocalization of the unvocalized Hebrew text. The Hebrew word corresponding to the Latin *annorum* (*shānim*) can, if unvocalized, also mean *duorum* (*shenáyim*). The passage in the second verse of the third chapter of Habakkuk, which should have been and was rendered by the Vulgate *in medio annorum vivifica illud* was translated by the Itala as *in medio duorum animalium*.⁴ The word *animalium* came from the misreading of the text by the patristic translators who, in their great zeal to find a christological prophecy in each and every word of the Old Testament writings, read *chaiioth* (= animals) instead of *chaiëhu* (= revive it). The Vulgate has restored the old text, but this corruption is still to be found in the Roman breviary and has given birth to the legend of *Bos et Asinus*.

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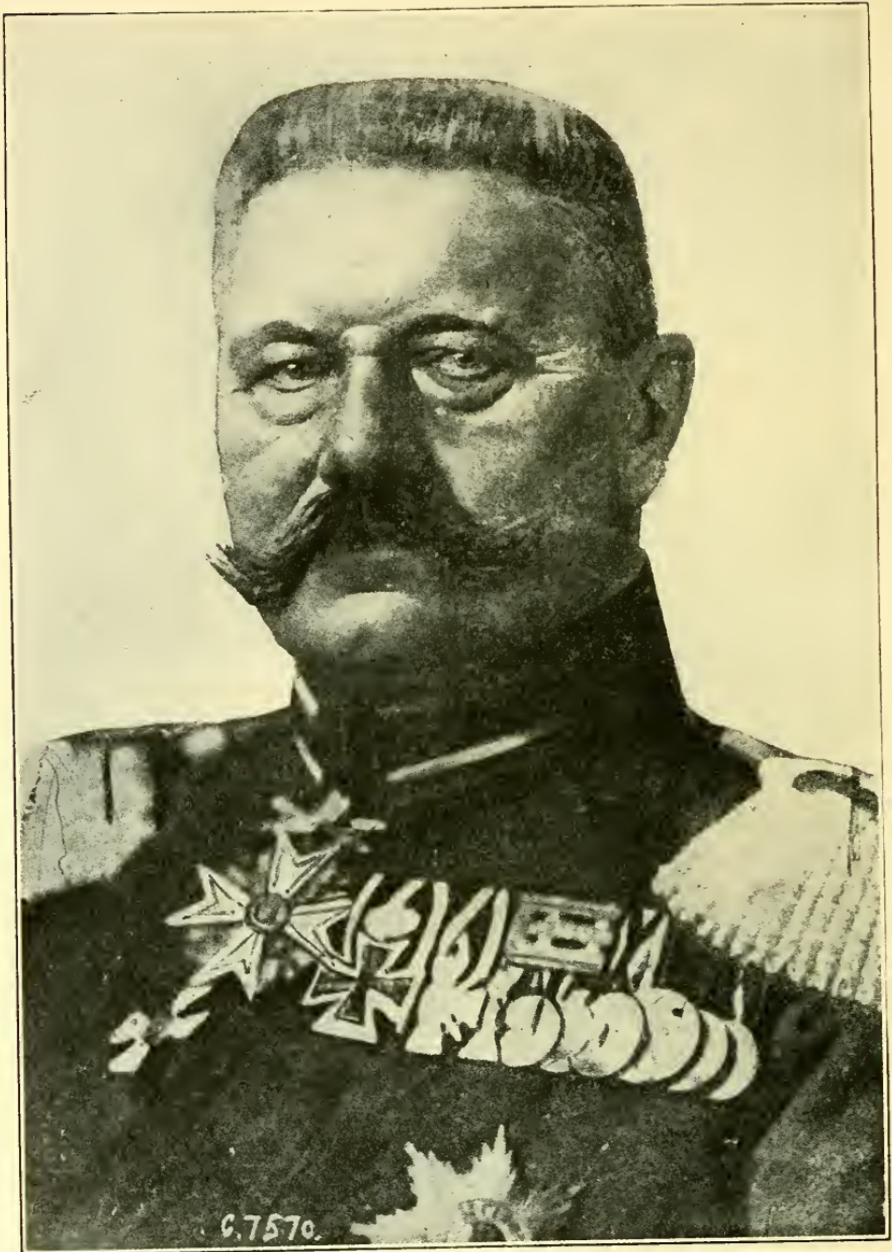
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¹ Josef Rudwin, Ph. D., *Die Prophetensprüche und -zitate im religiösen Drama des deutschen Mittelalters*. Leipzig and Dresden, 1913.

² Berlin, 1901, p. 50.

³ Cf. my essay "Zum Verhältnis des religiösen Dramas zur Liturgie der Kirche," *Modern Language Notes*, April, 1914, pp. 108-109.

⁴ The corresponding passage in the Septuagint, which may have greatly influenced the Itala version, is also a patristic interpolation, if we do not wish to discard altogether the tradition which ascribes this Greek version to Alexandrian Jews who lived before Christ.



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