

**FRAUDS AND
FOLLIES OF
THE FATHERS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649268139

Frauds and Follies of the Fathers by J. M. Wheeler

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Cover @ 2017

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J. M. WHEELER

**FRAUDS AND
FOLLIES OF
THE FATHERS**

Frauds and Follies

Of the Early Christian

Fathers.

WITH

A REVIEW OF THE WORTH OF THEIR TESTIMONY
TO THE FOUR GOSPELS.

BY

J. M. WHEELER.

PRICE SIXPENCE.

LONDON:

ETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY,

45, FLEET STREET, E.C.

1882.



1015.e.14

No. 1 ready December 18th, 1881,

“ PROGRESS. ”

A New Monthly Magazine.

Edited by G. W. FOOTE.

PRICE SIXPENCE.

LONDON: H. A. KEMP, 28, STONECUTTER STREET, E.C.

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FRAUDS AND FOLLIES OF THE FATHERS.

By J. M. WHEELER.

I.

To expose the delirium and delinquencies of a respected or even respectable body of men is always an ungracious, though it may not be an unnecessary, task. But when we are informed that rejection of certain supernatural stories means our condemnation here and damnation hereafter, we feel tempted to examine the kind of men who first accepted and promulgated those stories. The man who tells me I shall be damned if I do not believe in his theories or thaumaturgy may have many estimable qualities, but he must not be surprised if, disregarding these, I call attention to instances of his credulity. When, moreover, priests assume authority over conduct on the ground that their Church or their doctrines were God-given, it becomes necessary to investigate how that Church and those doctrines were built up; and if we find superstitious fooleries and pious frauds mixed therein, it may do something to abate our confidence in priestly pretensions.

In regard to the Fathers, as to much else, the Catholic is the most consistent of all Christian Churches. The men who established the Church, and fixed what was and what was not Canonical Gospel, are surely entitled to some authority on the part of believers. When Protestants wish to prove the authenticity of their infallible book, they have to fall back upon the witness of the fallible Fathers whose authority they are at other times always ready to repudiate.

The intellectual and moral character of the men who were the original depositaries of Christian faith and literature is then evidently of the utmost importance. All historical evidence as to the authenticity of the New Testament, or the faithfulness of ecclesiastical history, comes through them. If they were credulous and untrustworthy, the edifice built upon their testimony or their faith will be found to be tottering.

Now, concerning the Fathers of the Christian Church, we have, at the outset, to allege that, as a class, not only were they superstitious and credulous, and therefore unreliable, but that many of them were absolutely fraudulent, not hesitating to use any and every means to further the interests of their religion.

Bishop C. J. Ellicott, in his article on the Apocryphal Gospels, which appeared in the "Cambridge Essays" for 1856, pp. 175,

176, says: "But credulity is not the only charge which these early ages have to sustain. They certainly cannot be pronounced free from the influence of pious frauds. . . . It was an age of literary frauds. Deceit, if it had a good intention, frequently passed unchallenged. . . . However unwilling we may be to admit it, history forces upon us the recognition of pious fraud as a principle which was by no means inoperative in the earliest ages of Christianity."

Jeremiah Jones says: "To make testimonies out of forgeries and spurious books to prove the very foundation of the Christian revelation, was a method much practised by some of the Fathers, especially Justin Martyr, Clemens Alexandrinus, and Lactantius."—"A New and Full Method of Settling the Canonical Authority of the New Testament," part ii., chap. xxxiv., p. 318, vol. i. 1827.

B. H. Cowper, a well-known champion of Christianity, and once editor of the *Journal of Sacred Literature*, confesses in the Introduction to his "Apocryphal Gospels" (p. xxv., 1867): "Ancient invention and industry went even further, and produced sundry scraps about Herod, Veronica, Lentulus, and Abgar, wrote epistles for Christ and his mother, and I know not how much besides. No difficulty stood in the way; ancient documents could easily be appealed to without necessarily existing; spirits could be summoned from the other world by a stroke of the pen, and be made to say anything; sacred names could be written and made a passport to fictions, and so on *ad libitum*."

M. Daillé says: "For these forgeries are not new and of yesterday; but the abuse hath been on foot above fourteen hundred years."—"The Right Use of the Fathers," p. 12, 1675.

Mosheim mentions "a variety of commentaries filled with impostures or fables on our Savior's life and sentiments, composed soon after his ascent into heaven, by men who, without being bad, perhaps, were superstitious, simple, and piously deceitful. To these were afterwards added other writings falsely accredited to the most holy apostles by fraudulent individuals."—"Institutes of Ecclesiastical History," part iii., chap. ii., sec. 17, p. 65, vol. i. Stubbs's edition, 1863.

The same justly-renowned historian declares that "a pernicious maxim which was current in the schools, not only of the Egyptians, the Platonists, and the Pythagoreans, but also of the Jews, was very early recognised by the Christians, and soon found among them numerous patrons—namely, that those who made it their business to deceive with a view of promoting the cause of truth were deserving rather of commendation than censure."—"Commentaries on the Affairs of the Christians before the time of Constantine the Great." Second century. sec. 7, pp. 44, 45. R. S. Vidal's translation. 1813.

Dr. Gieseler, Professor of Theology in Gottingen, says: "In reference to the advancement of various Christian interests, and

in like manner also to the confirmation of those developments of doctrine already mentioned, *the spurious literature* which had arisen and continually increased among the Jews and Christians, was of great importance. The Christians made use of such expressions and writings as had already been falsely attributed by Jews, from partiality to their religion, to honored persons of antiquity, and altered them in parts to suit their own wants, such as the book of Enoch and the fourth book of Ezra. But writings of this kind were also fabricated anew by Christians, who quieted their conscience respecting the forgery with the idea of their good intention, for the purpose of giving greater impressiveness to their doctrines and admonitions by the reputation of respectable names, of animating their suffering brethren to steadfastness, and of gaining over their opponents to Christianity." — "Compendium of Ecclesiastical History," sec. 52, vol. i., pp. 157, 158. Translated by Dr. S. Davidson. T. & T. Clark's Foreign Theological Library.

But as our purpose is to examine these writings somewhat in detail, we will commence with

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS.

This name is given to those Christian writers who are alleged to have had intercourse with the Apostles. These writings are said to date from about 97 to 150 A.C. Dr. J. Donaldson says: "Of these writers investigation assures us only of the names of three, Clement, Polycarp and Papias. There is no satisfactory ground for attributing the 'Epistle of Barnabas' to Barnabas, the friend of Paul, nor the 'Pastor' of Hermas to the Hermas mentioned in the Epistle to the Romans."¹ Yet it is to be noticed that both these works were read in the primitive churches as Scripture, and are included in the Sinaitic Codex, which is asserted to be the most ancient manuscript of the New Testament extant. We take first

ST. CLEMENT.

There is a "fellow-laborer" with Paul of the name of Clement, mentioned in his Epistle to the Philippians (iv. 3), but whether this is the same individual whom the Catholics make a Pope of Rome, and some of the Fathers say was a kinsman of the Roman Emperor, is a matter of dispute, and much doubted by the best authorities. Bishop Lightfoot ("St. Paul's Epistles: Philippiana," p. 166) says: "The notices of time and place are opposed to the identification of the two." A sufficient evidence of the estimation in which St. Clement was held, however, is to be found in the number of forgeries which Christian piety have palmed upon the world in his name. In the Alexandrian Codex, one of the oldest and most important manuscripts of the New Testament, two epistles addressed to the Corinthians stand inscribed

¹ "The Apostolical Fathers," chap. i., p. 101, 1874.

with his name, and are enumerated in the list of books of the New Testament. Of these, the second is on all hands allowed to be a forgery, and the first is generally considered to be interpolated. That forgeries or interpolations have taken place in regard to those books of the same Codex which, upon the authority of certain Fathers, have been formed into the received canon of sacred Scripture, must not, of course, be suspected on pain of everlasting burning. The fact of the Epistle to the Hebrews being ascribed to St. Paul, the second Epistle ascribed to St. Peter, and such texts as those of the heavenly witnesses (1 John v., 7, 8), show any scholar that nothing of the kind could have taken place by any possibility whatever. Is it likely that God would allow his Holy Word to be tampered with?

The history of Clement of Rome, says Canon Westcott ("On the Canon," p. 22, 1881), "is invested with mythic dignity which is without example in the Ante-Nicene Church." It was too utterly impossible for other Fathers and founders of the Church to be invested with mythic dignity. Jesus must have come of the seed of King David, even though Joseph had nothing to do with his genealogy. "The events of his life," Westcott goes on to say, "have become so strangely involved in consequence of the religious romances which bear his name, that they remain in inextricable confusion." And so indeed they are; almost as badly as those of the founder of Christianity.

Clement is called at one time a disciple of St. Paul, and at another of St. Peter, who Paul withstood to his face because he was to be blamed (Gal. ii., 11). The Abbé Migne, in his *Patrologie*, makes him Pope in 91 A.C. The *Clementine Homilies*, purporting to be written by Clement himself, says he was ordained by Peter. Some put the first Popes as Linus, Cletus, Anacletus, and then Clement; others give their order as Linus, Cletus, Clement, Anacletus; others Clement, Linus, &c.; in short, they are given every way. Baron Bunsen called Anacletus a purely apocryphal and mythical personage, and some wicked sceptics have thought the same of the whole batch. In addition to the two epistles which stand on the same parchment with Holy Scripture, St. Clement is credited with two epistles to Virgins—which, though superstitious, are possibly none the less authentic; two epistles to James the brother of the Incarnate God, the Apostolic Canons (which include his own writings as sacred scripture), the Apostolic Constitutions, the Recognitions, a Liturgy, and twenty Clementine Homilies. All of these, says Mosheim, were fraudulently ascribed to this eminent father by some deceivers, for the purpose of procuring them greater authority. Clement has also been supposed the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Acts of the Apostles.

Restricting ourselves for the present to the first epistle, generally put forward as genuine, until a comparatively late date quoted as authoritative scripture by the Fathers, put in the apostolic canons among sacred and inspired writings, and which Eusebius

tells us ("Hist. Eccl." iii, 16) was publicly read in very many churches in old times and even in his own day; we at once discover evidence that the writer could not have been akin to the Cæsars or of a noble Roman family. He bespeaks his Jewish birth by his continual citation of the Jew books, by his references to the services at Jerusalem (chaps. xl. and xli.), and by speaking of "our father Jacob." But, like other Christian writers, he is very loose in his quotations. For instance, he jumbles up the first Isaiah and an apocryphal Ezekiel in the following quotation, "Say to the children of my people, Though your sins reach from earth to heaven, and though they be redder than scarlet and blacker than sackcloth, yet if ye turn to me with your whole heart, and say, 'Father, I will listen to you as to a holy people.'" He mentions (chap. lv.) "the blessed Judith," which book, by the way, Volkmar and others think must be dated A.C. 117-118. He also (chap. xvii.) quotes Moses as saying, "I am but as the smoke of a pot," and other passages (chap. xxiii.-xxvi.), probably from the apocryphal "Assumption of Moses." But this is no worse than Matthew (ii., 23) quoting as from the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene;" Paul's wrongly quoting the Psalms (Eph. iv., 8); or Jude (ver. 14) citing the apocryphal book of Enoch as by "the seventh from Adam."¹ But it somewhat vitiates his supposed testimony to the canonical books. It is evident, however, that he was acquainted with Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians, and his own reads at times like a bad imitation of Paul.

The apostle to the Gentiles, and thereby the real founder of modern Christianity, disregarding a certain threat of its supposed founder (Matt. v., 22), ventured, in arguing for the resurrection, the somewhat questionable statement, "Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened except it die" (1 Cor. xv., 36). Clement altogether outdoes this. He says (chap. xxv.):

"Let us consider that wonderful sign [of the resurrection] which takes place in eastern lands, that is, in Arabia and the countries round about. There is a certain bird which is called a phoenix. This is the only one of its kind, and lives five hundred years. And when the time of its dissolution draws near that it must die, it builds itself a nest of frankincense and myrrh, and other spices, into which, when the time is fulfilled, it enters and dies. But as the flesh decays a certain kind of worm is produced, which, being nourished by the juices of the dead bird, brings forth feathers. Then, when it has acquired strength, it takes up that nest in which are the bones of its parents, and bearing these it passes from the land of Arabia into Egypt, to the city called Heliopolis. And, in open day, flying in the sight of all men, it places them on the altar of the sun,

¹ Pp. 12 and 13, vol. i., "Ante-Nicene Christian Library." All our citations, unless otherwise mentioned, will be taken from this valuable series of volumes.