

## ST EPHRAIM AND ENCRATISM.

IN the JOURNAL OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES for July 1905, I took it upon myself to criticize one or two rather important historical inferences drawn by Professor Burkitt from certain passages in the *Homilies* of Aphraates. The opinion I chiefly combated was that set forth in chap. iv of *Early Eastern Christianity*, viz. that the class of Christian ascetics whom Aphraates and others call *B'nai Q'yâmâ* were simply the baptized laity of the Syriac Church; and that, in the first half of the fourth century, the whole of that Church, like the sect of the Marcionites, would have severed from communion any person who ventured to marry, or continued to live the married life, after baptism.

Professor Burkitt replied to my criticisms in the next number of the JOURNAL, upholding his former view. He further expressed the opinion that the writings of St Ephraim would, if examined, be found to bear out his interpretation of Aphraates. Professor Burkitt points out that St Ephraim in his attack on Marcion is silent about the latter's rejection of marriage. He writes: 'Ephraim cannot have been ignorant of this; but, unless I am mistaken, it seemed to him neither strange nor reprehensible'; and again, 'An examination of the genuine works of Ephraim will, I venture to think, shew that he occupies much the same position as Aphraates'.

It is in the hope of being able to elucidate a point of Church history, and with no desire to sustain a controversy, that I broach this subject again.

I agree that if Aphraates is obscure we ought to try and interpret his meaning by the clearer light of some contemporary Syriac writer—if, that is, we regard him as a normal representative of the Syriac Church of his time. And I agree also that St Ephraim should present a fair standard of comparison. He died in 373 A.D., being Aphraates' junior by perhaps little more than a decade.

I cannot claim to have examined all St Ephraim's genuine

works; but from what I have read of him I have been led to the conclusion that he held no abnormal views on the subject of Christian marriage. St Ephraim, like Aphraates, was an ascetic, and as such it is not surprising to find that he considered virginity to be a higher state than that of wedlock. To him, as to Aphraates, celibacy and the ascetical life generally were the royal road to heaven; and when he is sounding the praises of virginity he at times almost gives the impression that it is the only way; even as St Jerome on similar occasions seems to depreciate marriage. All this is fully conceded. But we want to know what St Ephraim has to say when dealing directly with the subject of marriage. And for information on this point we naturally turn in the first place to his commentary on the Pauline Epistles.

The original Syriac of this work is not known to us; but it has been preserved in an Armenian version, a Latin translation of which was published by the Mechitarist Fathers of Venice in 1893. In the following extracts the italics (which follow the Mechitarist edition) mark roughly the text of St Paul; the rest is Ephraim's commentary.

1. Rom. vii 2. *Nam sicut quae sub viro est mulier, alligata est legi viri sui, donec vixerit vir: si autem mortuus fuerit vir eius, soluta est a lege viri*, ut sit quocum velit (p. 18).

2. 1 Cor. vii (init.). Post haec locutus est ille de virginitate, quae super omnia excelsior est, quippe quia leges non dominantur eius. Videns enim ille, quod de ea praedicaverat Dominus suus, verebatur praedicare eam et ipse. Verum quum vidisset homines eam quaerentes, factus est ipse consiliarius eorum, non praeceptor; hortator, non legislator.

On vv. 2 ff. *Propter fornicationem autem unusquisque suam uxorem habeat*. Utinam nullatenus frauderetis invicem (cf. v 5), *nisi forte ex consensu ad tempus*, ad vota implenda ieiuniis et orationibus; nam per dies solemnes continetis, *ne tentet nos satanas*. Hoc autem dico indulgens, non imperans (v. 6; this sentence should have been in italics). *Volo enim omnem hominem esse sicut meipsum*. Sine mandato haec eligebat. Sed gratia unicuique data est a Deo. Idem ipsum Domini sui effatum rursus protulit, quod nempe non omnis homo ad hoc satis est. Dixit porro, *alius quidem sic, alius vero sic*; quoniam alius sic est, et in hoc potest iustificari, et alius alio modo, quum datum sit illi regnare.

*Non nuptis autem, sive uxore carentibus, iis nimirum qui vidui, aut quae viduae sunt, bonum est illis, si sic permaneant, sicut et ego. Quod si non se continent, illi quoque nubant. Melius est enim secundo nubere, quam uri cupidine. Iis autem qui matrimonio iuncti sunt, praecepit Dominus ipse, uxorem a viro non discedere. Quod si discesserit, manere innuptam, si puritatem sibi elegerit; aut viro suo reconciliari, non autem alteri tradi.*

*Si quis uxorem habeat idololatram, et uxori placet habitare cum viro suo, habitet. Quod si putaverit vir fidelis inquinatum iri matrimonium suum per infidelem consortem, sciat, quod sanctum est semen viri infidelis in utero mulieris fidelis; similiter et foetus mulieris infidelis sanctificatus est ratione viri fidelis (pp. 59, 60).*

According to the above St Ephraim was not opposed even to second marriages. He doubtless was acquainted with the eighth Canon of Nicaea, which laid down that converts from the ranks of the Cathari were in particular to be required to 'communicate with persons twice married'. Jacob of Nisibis and Aitalaha of Edessa were among the Bishops present at Nicaea.

3. 1 Tim. iv 3. *Prohibent nubere, non propter maiorem virginitatis gradum, sed quia foedum videtur in oculis eorum matrimonium. Haec autem a quibusdam asseruntur de Marcionistis, a nonnullis vero de Manichaeis, et de variis sectis. Namque praedicens prophetavit Apostolus de illis post se futuris. Marcionistae profanum faciunt matrimonium, et Manichaei cibos, quos Deus fecit in consolationem cum gratiarum actione fidelium; idest, in solatium comedentium, et in gratiarum actionem non comedentium.*

4. In his commentary on the Diatessaron St Ephraim bears the same testimony:—

*Venerunt et accesserunt, ut eum interrogarent: Licetne alicui dimittere uxorem suam? Respondit eis et dixit: 'Non licet.' Dicunt ei: 'Moyses permisit nobis; cur ergo non licet?' Moyses, ait, propter duritiam cordis vestri permisit vobis, sed ab initio creationis hoc non fuit. Itaque ex hoc uno praecepto patet, quod ea quae propter duritiam cordis populi per Moysen constituta sunt, abrogari oportebat, quia populus cordis duri permutatus est cum populo, qui fidem Abrahami amabat. Nam quod dixit: 'Non occides, non adulterabis, &c.,' etiam ante legem observabantur. In lege haec praedicabantur, sed per Evangelium perficiebantur. Omnia enim mandata legis, quae certis ex causis eis datae (sic) et apud eos introductae (sic) sunt, cessarunt, non ac si antiquum destrueretur, sed ut novum confirmaretur (Moesinger's Latin translation from the Armenian, p. 162. The italics correspond to words spaced in Moes.).*

5. In the course of his comment on the words *Quam difficile est eis qui in possessionibus confidunt* [*intrare in regnum coelorum*], St Ephraim writes:—

Quomodo difficile est hoc? difficile tantum est talibus per portam perfectorum [ad verbum: Crucifixorum. Moes.] intrare in regnum coelorum. Ut porta datur in statu virginitatis degentium, ita et datur porta in mundo degentium, et in mundo degentes per suam portam in regnum possunt intrare, sed per portam virginum difficile est eis intrare. 'Difficile est,' non autem: 'Impossibile est' (p. 171).

On p. 64 St Ephraim says that riches are not necessarily harmful: 'Quum diceret, "Vae vobis divitibus," eos significavit qui nihil aliud quaerunt quam divitias.' It will be remembered that the class of persons whom Aphraates forbade to marry he also forbade to acquire worldly goods.

6. In Hymn iv *De Confessoribus* (Lamy iii 667) St Ephraim speaks of the abuse, through free will, of things in themselves lawful and good. A man, he says, is not blamed for eating, but for being a glutton: not for drinking, but for being a drunkard: not for engaging in legitimate discussion, but for being a wrangler. He goes on (I give Lamy's Latin rendering, which is quite literal):—

Nemo erubescit matrimonio iungi, quia coniugium naturae est; nemo laudatur quod adulteret, quia adulterium voluntatis est, unum amabile, alterum odibile.

Further on in the same Hymn we read (Lamy 673):—

'There are three things, lawful and unlawful: fornication is unlawful, marriage lawful, and virginity *extra naturam*' (*d'lâ k'yânâ*).

7. 'Pure to Him is wedlock, which is planted as a vine in the world, and from it babes, like fruit, are hanging' (*De Virginitate etc.* Lamy ii 797).

8. Speaking of heretical baptism, St Ephraim says that he who receives baptism from the heretics and believes in its validity 'is like Marcion, who eats (of the gifts) of the Maker and denies the Maker, and, though he was himself conceived and born, rejects marriage.—A bitter fruit that disowns its root' (*Adversus Scrutatores*, Ed. Rom. vi 126).

9. Finally there is a sermon of St Ephraim's, No. xviii of the *De Diversis Sermones* (Ed. Rom. vi 654-687), which gives

his views on the Christian layman's life. Professor Burkitt drew my attention to this work ; but I cannot agree with him as to its interpretation.

In the sermon St Ephraim denounces the sins of various classes in the community, and of married people with the rest. Married men take mistresses besides their lawful wives. Married women, it is implied, are also often unfaithful ; but their characteristic vice is that they indulge in superstition, and resort to charms and lustrations that their children may live and their husbands love them. It is made quite clear that baptized persons are in question : what aggravates their guilt is the fact that they defile themselves after having been washed from their sins in baptism. The writer sets before them as examples of faithful wedlock the lives of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. He exhorts women to be faithful to their husbands : ' Commit not fornication against thy God, nor adultery against thy partner. Have but one husband, and only one hope.' If they have been faithful hitherto, they are not to expose themselves to danger by listening to soothsayers and diviners :—

' When the Evil One sees the marriage bed that it is altogether pure, he resorts to spells and washings, that the pure couch may be defiled.'

And so St Ephraim goes on at great length ; the lesson enforced being purity, that is mutual fidelity, in the marriage state.

Professor Burkitt writes : ' There is nothing to shew that they [i. e. married women censured by St Ephraim for unfaithfulness and superstition] are at present, or that they would be in any case, admitted to full communion.' But surely what has to be shewn is that these women were not allowed to partake of Holy Communion on the ground of their being married. But this does not appear from the sermon in question ; and the above specimens of St Ephraim's teaching on matrimony seem to make it clear that his views on the subject were not abnormal. He approved of marriage, and even of second marriages. He was acquainted with the Marcionite discipline, and condemned it. He recognized that the Mosaic laws of divorce were abrogated by Christ. Moreover the comment on 1 Cor. vii 5, in passage 2—' ad vota implenda ieiuniis et orationibus, nam per dies solemnes continetis'—would seem to refer to a practice current in the Syriac Church, and to

imply that respectable married folk were communicants. That this was the case ought, it seems to me, to be taken for granted, in the absence of any direct indication to the contrary.

To turn now to Aphraates. Aphraates wrote (Hom. xviii 8) of marriage thus: 'Upon matrimony, which was given to the world by God, we cast no slur, God forbid! For thus it is written: "God saw all that He had made, and lo! it was very good." Nevertheless there are some things better than others. God created the heavens and the earth, and they are very good; but the heavens are better than the earth . . . And He created matrimony, and it is very good; but better than it is virginity.' He wrote also of virginity (xviii 12): 'A great reward is in store for this state, because we observe it of our free will, and not subject to the constraint of a commandment; and we are bound therein under no law.' But again he wrote (vii 20): 'Wherefore thus should the trumpeters, the heralds of the Church, cry and warn all the Society (*Q'yāmdā*) of God before the Baptism—they, I say, that have offered themselves for virginity and for holiness, youths and maidens holy—they shall the heralds warn. And they shall say: He whose heart is set to the state of matrimony, let him marry before baptism, lest he fall in the spiritual contest and be killed.'

Before we say positively that this passage implies an eccentric view of matrimony, let us compare the following words of St Ephraim with the extracts from his writings given above: 'Out of the water He made wine; He gave *it* for drink to the youths in the feast. For you who are keeping the fast, better is the unction than drink. In His wine the betrothed are wedded; by His oil the wedded are sanctified. By His wine *is* union; by His oil sanctification.'<sup>1</sup>

St Ephraim is speaking of the baptismal unction; and his words imply that some persons undertook at the time of their baptism to live a life of celibacy.<sup>2</sup> But this passage cannot be

<sup>1</sup> From Hymn iii *On the Epiphany*. The translation is that given by Dr Gwynn in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* vol. xiii p. 270. These Hymns are counted among the 'less well-attested' works of Ephraim by Professor Burkitt in his *S. Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel*; but he shews from internal evidence that they are almost certainly genuine.

<sup>2</sup> I am assuming that the words 'sanctified' and 'sanctification' here denote consecration to the celibate state, a meaning which they not infrequently bear in Syriac.

taken, in the face of St Ephraim's clear teaching on matrimony, to mean that *all* were expected to do so. There must be some other solution. So in Aphraates' case: when he says quite plainly that marriage is good and virginity optional, must there not be some other explanation of the passage in which he seems to imply that Baptism was reserved for ascetics?

The key to the difficulty in Aphraates and Ephraim alike is, I believe, that in the early Church those who wished to enter the ascetical state often did so at the time of their baptism. Thus Tertullian writes (*De Exhort. Cast.* i): 'That good—I mean sanctification—I distribute into several kinds . . . The first kind is virginity from birth; the second, virginity from the second birth, that is from the font, which either keeps pure in the marriage state by mutual compact, or else perseveres in widowhood from choice; the third grade remains, monogamy' (i.e., apparently, when a baptized person does not take another partner after the death of the first).

It would seem, then, that in the controverted passage Aphraates is contemplating only one special class of candidates for baptism, those, namely, who are also candidates for the ascetical life. By the words 'them, I say, that have offered themselves for virginity' I understand that he narrows the application of his subsequent remarks to this class. The context itself requires this, for in the next paragraph we read: 'And *after the baptism* let them observe those that are stout and those that are feeble. The stout they must encourage; but them that are slack and feeble let them send back from the contest openly.'<sup>1</sup>

The same explanation clears up any ambiguity in the language of St Ephraim as well, and shews him to be consistent with himself. If we adopt it we are released from the strange historical paradox that a whole national Church, in full communion with all the orthodox Churches, should have adopted, and maintained till well on in the fourth century, one of the most characteristic errors of Marcion; and this without a protest from—it could scarcely have been without the knowledge of—the rest of Christendom.

I have only one more word to say: it is with reference to the passage from St Epiphanius quoted by Professor Burkitt at the end of his reply. Professor Burkitt says that Aphraates would

<sup>1</sup> See *J. T. S.* vi pp. 521-533.

have 'thoroughly approved' of the wording of that passage. I would go a step further, and say that Aphraates would have approved it in exactly the sense in which Epiphanius wrote it. I do not understand Professor Burkitt to imply that Epiphanius, as well as Aphraates and Ephraim, rejected marriage for the baptized. Aphraates, like Epiphanius, would certainly have condemned a professed ascetic for marrying contrary to his vow, and would as certainly have held him excommunicate until he had done penance. But this implies no disapproval of marriage for baptized Christians at large.

R. H. CONNOLLY.