

## THE DISCUSSION OF GREGENTIUS AND HERBAN, HELD IN YEMEN IN THE FIFTH CENTURY.<sup>1</sup>

BY THE REV. A. LUKYN WILLIAMS, D.D., Hon. Canon of Ely.

WE can picture the scene, the crowded assembly under the open sky, the King upon his throne, with Gregentius the Archbishop at his side, "Scribes and Pharisees" with other learned Jews from all the cities crowding round in support of Herban their spokesman, and, seated near by, the secretary Palladius taking down the speeches. We can hear the Archbishop demanding a statement of the difficulties which the Jew feels in becoming a Christian, and note his readiness in debate. For he had an intimate acquaintance, not indeed with Jews or Judaism (knowing nothing of either), but with the approved and traditional method of meeting Jewish objections. We can feel the contempt of the cultivated Greek and highly placed ecclesiastic for a mere Jew, and can appreciate the good temper with which the latter states his case, free from all servility.

Naturally this Discussion has nothing distinctively original in the general treatment of its subject. The difficulties professed by Jews in accepting Christianity have always been the same; while the deeper reason, the natural dislike of that humiliation of spirit which is necessary for the reception of the Cross of Christ, has remained unnoticed by them, and but dimly perceived by Christians. There are the usual questions, as, for example, why Christians disregard the Law and its ordinances, just noticed here but not dwelt upon; whether the seed of Abraham stands for Jews or Christians; how the doctrine of the Trinity can be true; or that of the Incarnation of the Son of God; and these questions are stated and discussed in the ordinary manner, with appeals to well-worn texts.

And yet this treatise has its distinctive points and its own interest. These lie in the personality of the disputants—for if Gregentius is commonplace, Herban is not; in the historical setting—this is the earliest record of a public controversy in presence of

<sup>1</sup> τοῦ ἐν ἀγίοις Γρηγορητιῶν Ἀρχιεπισκόπου γενομένου Τέφρων Διάλεξις μετὰ Ἰουδαίου Ἑρβάν τοῦνομα. Migne, *P. Gr.*, lxxxvii., cc. 621-784. Cf. Krumbacher, *Byz. Lit.*, 1897, p. 59.

royalty ; in the special order in which the controversy takes its course ; in the striking events which mark its close ; and lastly, as we now know, in the reaction which followed them.

Nothing is known of Herban save what may be gathered from this document, and little more of his opponent. Gregentius is said to have lived for many years as an anchorite in Egypt, and then to have been sent with his secretary Palladius by Proterius, Patriarch of Alexandria (who died in A.D. 487), to be Bishop of Tephra (*Zafār*), the capital city of the Himyarites (or Homerites, as they are called in patristic writings) in S. Arabia.<sup>1</sup> A book exists entitled *The Laws of the Homerites*, which is attributed to him.

The Discussion of Gregentius with Herban the Jew professes to be the record of a four-day public controversy between them, taken down by the Palladius above-mentioned. We may reasonably suppose that some years elapsed from Gregentius' appointment as Bishop before he would be able to persuade the King to arrange such a Discussion, which therefore can hardly have taken place much earlier than A.D. 490. The end of the document implies that some years had elapsed since the controversy itself. But it contains nothing that points definitely to a later age, and there does not appear to be any valid reason to doubt that the narrative, essentially as we have it, belongs to the beginning of the sixth century. It may be dated, with some confidence, between A.D. 510 and 520.

When we turn to consider the substance of the Discussion we find that, as with the majority of these polemical tracts, it is very diffuse, and goes from point to point without much method. One wishes in vain that their writers had been as orderly as Isidore of Seville. It must be sufficient therefore to indicate what seem to be the primary objects of discussion on each of the four days, selecting from each anything that is of special interest.

The general subject of the First Day seems to be the Divinity of Christ. The Archbishop asks why Herban resists the light of the Sun of righteousness, and the latter retorts by saying that Christians resist God even more by following other customs than those He has ordained. For Gentiles are inferior to Jews, whom God protected in coming forth from Egypt. Gregentius replies that rather the Jews were like the Egyptians, for they perished in the wilderness.

<sup>1</sup> *Zafār* was about 50 miles N.N.W. of Aden.

At this Herban expresses his regret that the Scriptures had ever been translated into Greek! The subject of the Trinity is then discussed, the Archbishop pleading that it is not he but David who teaches it. But, says the Jew, how can a crucified Nazarene, a malefactor, be the Son of God? Deuteronomy xxviii. 66 *sq.*, replies Gregentius, points to Jesus on the cross; you are to *see* the life hanging there. Consider also Genesis, xlix. 10. Ah well, says Herban, when He comes we shall believe on Him. Fool, retorts his Eminence, it says, He that cometh is the expectation of the Gentiles, and we Gentiles have believed on Him. So He has already come. "Israel the beloved" and "Jacob the servant" in Baruch iii. 36 *sq.* mean Jesus. You conjecture that Jesus is God, replies the Jew, when the preceding words in that same passage are, "This is our God, and there shall none other be accounted of in comparison of Him!" I make no conjecture, says Gregentius, for *v.* 37 says that He "did appear upon earth, and was conversant with men."

Prophecies and types of the cross are then advanced.<sup>1</sup> Herban asks why the prophets did not speak more plainly, and is told that they use parables because they are not tied by the ignorance of those to whom they spoke.<sup>2</sup> Psalm lxxii. is discussed, and the reference to Jesus is upheld. When the Jew urges that when Solomon "humbled the false accuser" (*v.* 4, LXX.), it was not only one but all the tyrant demons, the Archbishop grants that he did indeed "keep the demons in jars, and sealed them down, and covered them with earth," but adds that he was himself overcome by them, and showed no sign of repentance. No one blesses the name of Solomon. Yet your Christ, replies the Jew, could not even save Himself! What then of Psalm xvi. 10? says the Archbishop. On the Jew asserting that this cannot refer to the Son of God, but to a servant who is entreating, Gregentius replies that He is there speaking as Man, for the form of a servant was necessary in fighting against the adversary. "I'm in a maze," cries Herban, "the son of Joseph the carpenter and of Mary his wife is the Son of God who comes into the world!" Psalm ii. 7 and cx. 1 are adduced as proofs.

But evening had now come, and the Jews rejoiced that Herban

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, xl. 3; xc. 4 *sq.*

<sup>2</sup> Observe that there is no mention of the argument which is to be found in tracts of the seventh century onwards, that if they had spoken plainly of Jesus their writings would have been destroyed by the Jews.

had had enough independence to stand up to the Archbishop in discussion, and they eagerly covered him with kisses. He said, let us rather pray that the God of the Law may help us ; because, as you see, the Archbishop is very skilful in the Scriptures, and no little strength is needed to persuade him. He knows the subject, and how to bring arguments against us. So they encouraged him not to be afraid.

The prominent matters of discussion on the Second Day are the meaning of the Law, the nature of Israel, and the Restoration to the Land.

The King is present as before, and the Archbishop, after commanding silence, informs the Jew that Christians do not, as he supposes, worship idols or any other than the One God. To this Herban replies that they blaspheme in saying that the Crucified is at the right hand of the power of God. But, Gregentius retorts, Psalm cx. 2 says even more, for " the LORD shall send forth the rod," and this suggests the cross. Then he should have said so, answers the Jew. Besides, when it adds " out of Sion " the implication is that it had come first from Mount Sinai, and the wood from which the Cross was cut cannot be shown to have come from there.<sup>1</sup> Gregentius points out that a rod has no power in itself, but the Cross needed power from the heavenly Sion. The Logos took the Rod, and smote all His enemies with it.

Shall Joseph's son judge the world ? asks the Jew. But He is not Joseph's son, replies the Christian. Consider Psalm cx. 3, " Before the morning-star I begat Thee," and His human nature was born of the Holy Spirit through the Virgin, who remained inviolate. For in Isaiah xxix. 11 *sq.* the sealed book is the Virgin ; the man is Joseph ; the man knows letters, *i.e.* Joseph had had another wife ; the man could not read the divine letter, *i.e.* Joseph could not have carnal intercourse with Mary. As the fire did not consume the bush, so she remained Virgin even after the Birth. Then, retorts Herban, He was born only in semblance and appearance ! Nay, for remember how Habakkuk visited Daniel in the sealed den.<sup>2</sup> Further, though He died a violent death, this also was foretold in Isaiah liii.

Herban was silent for a full hour, and the other Jews were con-

<sup>1</sup> This appears to be the meaning of a difficult passage (col. 653 B).

<sup>2</sup> Bel and the Dragon, *v.* 36.

founded ; while the Christians praised the High Priest, and the King rejoiced, for he had never heard the truth told so clearly before. And once more the Jew says " I'm in a maze "—for Moses bids us serve God alone (Deut. vi. 4), and yet David and Isaiah say this of Him who is reckoned Christ !

That, says the Archbishop, answers to Isaiah's words, " Who hath believed ? " If your fathers disbelieved when they saw Christ's miracles how can you—you offspring of vipers—believe when you only hear of them ?

Yet, says Herban, our Law is the greater, for it was given before yours. See too Psalm xix. 7, " restoring the soul." That, replies Gregentius, speaks of a future Law, and my Christ is " the Law of the Lord," who has turned thousands and tens of thousands to Him, for my Christ is sinless. Habakkuk iii. 3 is then discussed at some length with curious interpretations. *Paran*, for example, " the darkshaded mountain " of the LXX, means that Messiah was hidden in the Virgin. " God " and " the Holy One " are both mentioned. When the Jew affirms that they are two names for one object he is asked which is the greater, and, on his replying " God," the Archbishop triumphantly cries, " So there is a greater and a less Name in God ! " It means, he adds, that He shall come, but in a body. And indeed the preceding verse " between the two living creatures " (LXX) refers to His two natures, human and Divine.

Yet, says Herban, the old wine is better than the new. No doubt, is the reply, your Law is wine, but it has gone bad.

Then follow many passages dealing with the relation of God to Israel, and again others referring to the Restoration to the Land. But is not, asks the Archbishop, Jerusalem now filled with Churches of the Crucified Christ ? Further, the name Israel, " The Mind seeing God,"<sup>1</sup> no longer is yours, for you have willingly shut your eyes, and it has been given to the Gentiles. " And I will charge the clouds to pour no rain " upon the vineyard (Isa. v. 6), where the " clouds " mean the prophecies and the books of the Law, and the " rain " is the words and thoughts, because you cannot understand what the Scripture says. Neither is it of any use for Herban to appeal to passages indicating God's blessing upon the Jews, for the

<sup>1</sup> *Νοῦς ὁρῶν τὸν Θεόν*. Cf. Philo, *De Praemiis et Poenis*, § 7, Mangey ii, 415. So Jerome on Isaiah i. 3 (*Israel, id est, mens videns Deum*), but rejected in his *Quaest. Hebr. Gen. xxxii. 28*.

Archbishop invariably answers that they all refer to the Church.

Yet, after all, retorts the Jew, Moses charged us in Deuteronomy iv. 26 not to believe in another God. But Christ is not "another God," replied Gregentius, and adds, with some attempt at philosophising, this *νεώτερος θεός* (to use your phrase) is necessary, for without Him God the Father works nothing, even as a King needs speech to issue his edicts. God works by His Word (Ps. xxxiii. 6). But if you do not believe God, you will not believe me, no, not if you live as long as Methuselah! You must be baptized, Isaiah i. 16. No, retorts Herban, the verse refers to ceremonial washing in the Temple laver, after sin has been committed.

At the end of this second day the Jews once more rejoiced over Herban, and the Christians over "the blessed Gregentius, because the grace of the Spirit was with him."

The account of the Third Day begins by the Archbishop taking up Herban's last argument, and replying that Isaiah i. 16 cannot refer to legal washing, for the whole chapter shows that God does not want the Jews to appear in the Temple before Him. He could not therefore bid them use legal washing. But, replies Herban, why did He say (Isa. i. 25, *sq.*), "I will purge thee by fire that thou mayest be clean"? He refers, is the answer, to the effect of the Babylonian captivity. Yet does not, Herban asks, Isaiah x. 17-20 tell of our final salvation and of the destruction of the Gentiles? Certainly not, Gregentius replies, it means that when Israel is under Rome Christ will come, and be rejected by the Jews, and will ascend to heaven, and send out His disciples, and turn all the Gentiles to the knowledge of Himself. Isaiah xlix. is discussed, the Archbishop urging that the Judaea which shall be inhabited for ever is "the Judaea above, the country of the Word of God who took human flesh of the line of Judah." So too Psalm xlvii. must refer to the Ascension of Christ with His rule over "all the nations." When Herban adduces Psalm lxxvii. 14 *sq.* the Archbishop says that the hour is too late to discuss it then. And the King rose up and the silence was broken.

But as the Jews encouraged Herban, he answered, When I consider the man and his intelligence I shall never be able to convince him. In fact we shall be worsted by him. For I saw this night Moses and Jesus standing on a pinnacle of some temple and disputing. And I saw Moses worshipping Him, and binding His

hands to Him, as to the Lord God, and standing by Him in fear. I cried, "Lord Moses, it is a fine thing that you are doing!" He turned and rebuked me, "Cease, I make no mistake. I am not on your side. I recognise my Maker and Lord. What then have you to do with the just Archbishop, whom you trouble in vain? Still, you shall see to-morrow and next day that you will be badly defeated, and will, as I, worship Him, my Jesus and Lord." These things have I seen, Brethren, and know not what they mean. Still, I will do my best.

Next day, the Fourth Day, when the assembly had been prepared the King came with the Archbishop. And Herban too stood with the priests and the teachers of the Law, who accompanied him.

Tell me, said the Archbishop, who is the Holy One in whom is God's way? Israel, said Herban boldly, for it is said in our Law, which is higher than yours, "I said ye are gods" (Ps. lxxxii. 6). Liar! retorted the Archbishop, you holy, who slew in body the God of heaven and earth! You forget the rest of the verse, "you shall die." The Holy One is Christ. Perhaps, said the Jew, you want to enlarge on Psalm xcvi. 5, "the gods of the Gentiles are demons"? From the day, replied Gregentius, that the Lord Jesus was crucified all the gods went away like smoke. If you do not believe me bring me some demoniacs, and I will call on the Lord Jesus, and the demons will be seized with terror and depart. Yes, says Herban, I have heard that the prophets of the Christians in these days, and especially those who have forsaken all, and live in the deserts, do great miracles. No doubt you can injure me, but persuade me first with words, and then act if you are allowed to do so.

They then discuss Psalm xcvi. 1; xcix. 1, "the Lord reigneth," and then the Jew returns to his old difficulty that he cannot understand how the Christ could suffer and die. The Archbishop explains that as all had sinned, even the Jews, and the Demon was rejoicing thereat, God nevertheless did not wish to act tyrannically or unjustly even to him by seizing man out of his hands, but sent His Logos, who is united with a man in the Virgin's womb (the Archbishop comes very near heresy), and defeats the demons, dies, and rescues men from Hades, and afterwards ascends, and sends out His disciples, to the Jews first and then to all the Gentiles. If Christ had appeared in all this as God, the devil might have had some excuse for thinking he had not been treated fairly.

But Jesus broke the sabbath, and this was the reason why our fathers crucified Him! What then, replies Gregentius, is there against the Law in His raising the dead and working other miracles of kindness? Yes, says Herban, why does He say, "I go to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John xx. 17), if He was the true Son of God? For I often read your Gospels, saying to a Christian friend, Hand me one of your books, that I may gain profit from them, and become a Christian. Small blame to you for this! says the Archbishop. But when Jesus said "Father" and "God" He had His human nature in His mind.

Herban sees Palladius, "whom the Archbishop had brought with him from Alexandria as his secretary," writing down the whole discussion, and remarks that what has been said will be made clear (*δηλωθήσονται*) to others. Yes, replies Gregentius, for "the opening (*δήλωσις*) of Thy words giveth light, and giveth understanding unto the simple" (Ps. cxix. 130). But, cries Herban, who are the simple? You Hebrews, replies Gregentius, who had the imperfect law. Imperfect! when Moses and Elijah had their sight perfected by it! Yes, "imperfect," not ineffectual, for even they were not made perfect. It was only Jesus who was sinless, and took on Himself the sin of the whole world, and deifying the lower nature took it to heaven and made it sit down with God the Father. This is true perfecting.

Why waste time! cries Herban, I'll end the controversy.<sup>1</sup> Show me Jesus and I'll be a Christian! Then the Jews shouted, Don't be deceived! Play the man! For nothing is stronger than the God of our fathers. But Herban said, You talk nonsense. If he persuades me that Jesus indeed is He about whom the Prophets spoke so much, I shall be an alien from the God of our fathers if I do not believe on Him, free from all doubt.

But how, said Gregentius, do you wish me to convince you? Pray your Master, replied Herban, if He is in heaven, as you say, to come down to me, that I may behold Him and speak with Him, and be baptized.

Yes, shouted the Jews, let us see if your talk is justified by deeds. Show us your Christ, and we will believe. But privately they said, Do you wish him to show us this? Alas, we shall become Christians! But how can He appear, when his bones are in the tomb?

<sup>1</sup> *Ἐγὼ παραλύσω τὴν διενη.*



The Archbishop goes away a little distance to pray, bending three times to the very pavement, and when the King and that part of the multitude which believed saw him praying, and had said *Amen*, then there was a great earthquake, and a thunderstorm arising in the east. All were terrified and fell to the ground. The heavens opened, a bright cloud unfolded itself from the gate of heaven, and came towards them, and behold! the Lord Jesus, who cries aloud, "At the entreaty of the Archbishop I appear before you, I who was crucified of your fathers." The eyes of the Jews were blinded, like Paul's, and Christ withdrew in the cloud.

Herban is led by the hand to the Archbishop, complaining that Christ has rendered evil for evil. Nay, is the reply, seeing the Lord with unworthy eyes you were blinded. If then our eyes are opened, says Herban, we will be baptized. Not so, but if you like I will baptize you and then you will recover your sight. But suppose you baptize us and our eyes are not opened! I will baptize one of you as a test.

So one Jew was baptized, and he saw, and he cried aloud, "Jesus Christ is very God, and I believe on Him." The rest were then baptized, and recovered their sight. Herban confessed his faith, and his reverence for Gregentius. Now the King was his sponsor, and gave him the name of Leo, and made him a member of his Council. Innumerable<sup>1</sup> Jews were baptized with him, and at the command of the King and Archbishop "the whole congregation of the Jews which dwelt in all the cities of the kingdom" were also baptized. At the Archbishop's suggestion the King forbade them living any more together, but dispersed them among the Christians, marriages with unbaptized Hebrews being strictly prohibited. "So the whole Jewish nation became mingled with the Christian, and kneaded together in the course of time completely forgot its ancestry."

The document ends with a description of the blessed effect of this illumination of the whole kingdom of the Homerites (*τῶν ὁμηριτῶν*)—joy, peace, divine services, almsgiving, the rescinding of all unjust laws, though offenders against God's law were put to death. And the King obeyed Gregentius until his death some thirty years later, when he was buried in Tephar, the royal city of the Homerites, Serdidus his son succeeding him, and being like his

<sup>1</sup> ὡσεὶ πεντακισχίλων πεντακοσίων χιλιάδων.

father [in all things. Gregentius dies soon, and is buried in the cemetery of the great church, with grievous lamentation.

What does it all mean? Is it not in reality an idealised description of a sincere attempt to win the Jews by methods which seemed right at the time? The Archbishop appears to have done his best—with very inadequate knowledge of the real difficulties felt by Jews—to persuade them of the truth of Christianity. But the closing pages raise the suspicion that there was more than moral suasion at work. The velvet glove covered, one fears, the iron hand.

If so, the reaction was terrible. For after the death, presumably, of the successor of Gregentius' patron, there was persecution, and almost the extermination, of the Christians by a Jewish ruler.

We are not indeed yet in a position fully to coordinate the events recorded in the newly discovered fragments of the *Book of the Himyarites*<sup>1</sup> with such other information as we possess about the Himyarite kingdom. But it seems that in A.D. 523 a Jew named Masrūq,<sup>2</sup> only indirectly connected with the reigning house, usurped the throne, and, with the help of "Jewish priests who were from Tiberias," and of some who were "Christians in name," seized the capital Zafār (Tephar), and offered to all the Christians in the kingdom the choice of Judaism or death.<sup>3</sup> There was a very large number of martyrs, male and female, some being killed with the utmost cruelty. Many were in the Church at Zafār when it was burnt after the siege. It is consoling to know that the triumph of Masrūq and his followers was but shortlived. For during the persecution a Christian fled to the Emperor Justin (A.D. 518-527), at Byzantium, who sent him, with recommendations, to the King of Abyssinia. The latter, "the Christ-loving king Kāleb," came with a great army, defeated and slew Masrūq, and told the priests to grant absolution to those remaining Christians who had apostatized out of fear, and now repented. But even the success of the Abyssinian Christians did not last more than half a century. For about A.D. 570 they were displaced by "a small band of Persian adventurers"<sup>4</sup> who in their turn had to give way to the enthusiastic followers of Mohammad early in the seventh century.

<sup>1</sup> They were found in 1920 in the cloth-covered boards of a Syriac liturgy written in 1469-70 A.D. They have been edited, with a Translation and Introduction in English, by A. Moberg, Lund, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> His name is written upside down in the MS., as a form of execration.

<sup>3</sup> Syriac text, p. 7a, ll. 2 sq., 7 sq.

<sup>4</sup> *Encycl. Brit.* ed. 11, s.v. *Sabaeans*, xxiii. 956.