

COMMENTARY ON THE ODES.

J. Rendel Harris, 1909.

The Odes and Psalms of Solomon is an important addition to our knowledge of the literature which immediately anticipates or directly follows the time of Christ. It contains, on the one hand, a hitherto unknown version of the Psalms of Solomon, a collection which has often been studied, from the standpoints both of the higher and lower criticism, and which is, by common consent, referred to the middle of the first century B.C.; and on the other hand it presents a new collection which I have called, for the sake of distinction, and in harmony with the references in ancient writers, by the name of the Odes of Solomon ; they are here edited and translated from a Syriac (Aramaic) manuscript in my own possession. I believe that their value and antiquity will at once be recognized. The Odes are marked by a vigor and exaltation of spiritual life, and a mystical insight, to which we can only find parallels in the most illuminated periods of the history of the Church.

In the Odes, there is little that can be traced to the Old Testament, almost nothing that is to be credited to the Gospels or other branches of Christian literature. Their radiance is no reflection from the illumination of other days, their inspiration is first-hand and immediate. It answers very well to the summary which Aristides made of the life of the early Christian Church when he described them as indeed 'a new people with whom something Divine is mingled.'

In the Odes, there is not a sad note, and there is hardly a vindictive note in the whole collection. And on the theological side, the leading characteristic is experience, and not dogma : and experience is much harder to date than dogma, and shows fewer of the weather marks of evolution. Sometimes, the expressions of the Odists rise to such a height that they catch from the object of their Faith something that is everlasting rather than evolutionary. It is difficult to date a man who has disclosed the fact that he is supremely happy and that God has made his face to shine with the light of heaven. The only way in which we could date such a phenomenon would be to say that, if he is not an isolated specimen, the songs must proceed from some time of spiritual elevation; and since it is historically verifiable, that the experimental time of the bloom of Church life is the first age, then these hymns or odes must belong to the first days of the Church.

There can be no reasonable doubt of the antiquity of the recovered Book of Odes. That which seems to be the latest composition amongst them is attested already by Lactantius in the beginning of the fourth century as having place in the collection which it occupies in our manuscript. The portions of the Odes which have been transcribed by the author of the *Pistis Sophia* towards the end of the third century, are evidently taken from a book which was either canonical or not very far removed from canonicity ; so that it is easy to carry the Odes back into the second century.

Our own investigations have shown that the Odes agree in the extent of their composition with the statistical data for their measurement, preserved in the early Stichometries. We have also shown that they agree in sentiment with the beliefs and practices of the earliest Ages of the Church. It came out clearly in the investigation that the writer, while not a Jew, was a member of a Community of Christians, who were for the most part of Jewish extraction and beliefs, and the apologetic tone which is displayed, in the Odes, towards the Gentiles, as a part of the Christian Church, is only consistent with the very earliest ages, and with communities like the Palestinian Churches where Judaism was still in evidence and in control.

We think therefore, that it will be admitted on all hands, that the discovery of this collection of Odes and Psalms is not only valuable for the fact that it presents us, for the first time, with the Syriac version of the extant Psalms of Solomon, but that the Odes of Solomon is in itself a memorial of the first importance for rightly understanding the beliefs and experiences of the Primitive Church. We have expressed our belief that in part, at least, the collection belongs to the latter quarter of the first century (75 A.D.), but if it should be objected that this is too early a date, it cannot be many years in excess. Even if the writings do not fall within the actual time of the composition of the books of the New Testament, they scarcely fall outside the limits of the same, and we may, therefore, be sure that the Christian Church of today has been enriched by the discovery of a literary monument of the highest value.