

Studies in Patrology VIII:

The Shepherd of Hermas

Introduction:

Hermas is one of the first or second century's fathers and the author of the book called "The Shepherd", a work which had great authority in the early church and was ranked with Holy Scripture. St. Eusebius tells us that it was publicly read in the churches, and that while some denied it to be canonical, others "considered it most necessary". St. Athanasius speaks of it, together with the Didache, in connection with the Deuterocanonical Books of the Old Testament, as uncanonical yet recommended by the ancients for the reading of catechumens. Elsewhere he calls it a most profitable book. Rufinus similarly says that the ancients wished it to be read, but not to be used as an authority as to the Faith. It is found with the Epistle of Barnabas at the end of the New Testament in the great Siniatic Bible *Aleph* (fourth century), and between the Acts of the Apostles and the Acts of Paul in the stichometrical list of the Codex Claromontanus. St. Irenaeus and Tertullian cite the "Shepherd" as Scripture. St. Clement of Alexandria constantly quotes it with reverence, and so did Origen, who held that the author was the Hermas mentioned by St. Paul, Rom 14. He said the work seems to him to be very useful, and divinely inspired.

Contents:

The book consists of five visions, twelve mandates, or commandments, and ten similitudes, or parables. It commences abruptly in the first person: "He who brought me up sold me to a certain Rhoda, who was at Rome. After many years I met her again, and began to love her as a sister." As Hermas was on the road to Cumae, he had a vision of Rhoda, who was presumably dead. She told him that she was his accuser in heaven, on account of an unchaste thought he had once had concerning her, though only in passing; he was to pray for forgiveness for himself and his entire house. He is consoled by a vision of the Church in the form of an aged woman, weak and helpless from the sins of the faithful, who tells him to do penance and to correct the sins of his children. Subsequently he sees her made younger through penance, yet wrinkled and with white hair; then again, as quite young but still with white hair -- this is the Church of the forgiven. Lastly, she shows herself all glorious as a Bride -- this is the Church of the end of the days. In the second vision she gives Hermas a book, which she afterwards takes back in order to add to it. He is to give this writing to the presbyters, who will read it to the people; another copy is for "Grapte", who will communicate it to the widows; and a third is to be sent by Clement to the foreign Churches, "for this is his office".

The fifth vision, which is represented as taking place twenty days after the fourth, introduces "the Angel of repentance" in the likeness of a shepherd, from whom the whole work takes its name. He delivers to Hermas a series of precepts as to the belief in one God, simplicity, truthfulness, chastity, long-suffering, faith, fear, continence, confidence, cheerfulness, humility, good desires. These form an interesting development of early Christian ethics. The only point which needs special mention is the assertion of a husband's obligation to take back an adulterous wife on her repentance. The eleventh mandate, on humility, is concerned with false prophets who desire to occupy the first seats (that is to say, among the presbyters). It is possible that we have here a reference to Marcion, who came to Rome about 142-4 and desired to be admitted among the priests (or possibly even to become pope). After those come ten similitudes (*parabolai*) in the form of visions, which are explained by the angel. The longest of these (#9) is an elaboration of the parable of the building of a tower, which had formed the matter of the third vision. The tower is the Church, and the stones of which it is built are the faithful. It

is clearly pointed out that all the baptized are included, though they may be cast out for grave sins, and can be readmitted only after penance.

The whole book is thus concerned with the Christian virtues and their exercise. It is an ethical, not a theological, work. The intention is above all to preach repentance. A single chance of restoration after fall is given to Christians, and this opportunity is spoken of as something new, which had never been clearly published before. The writer is pained by the sins of the faithful and is sincerely anxious for their conversion and return to good works. As a layman, Hermas avoids dogma.

Authorship and Date:

The reference to St. Clement as pope would give the date 89-99 for at least the first two visions. On the other hand, if the writer is identified with the Hermas mentioned by St. Paul, an earlier date becomes probable, unless he wrote as a very old man. But three ancient witnesses, one of whom claims to be contemporary, declare that he was the brother of Pope St. Pius I, who was not earlier than 140-55. These three are (a) the Muratorian fragment; (b) the Liberian catalogue of popes, in a portion which dates from 235 (Hippolytus?); (c) the poem of Pseudo-Tertullian against Marcion, of the third or fourth century. (a) "And very recently, in our own times, in the city of Rome, Herma wrote the Pastor, when his brother Pius, the bishop, sat upon the see of the Church of the city of Rome. And therefore that [book] ought to be perused, but it cannot be publicly read to the people assembled in church, neither among the Prophets, whose number is complete, nor among the Apostles [who came] in the end of times." (b) "Under his [Pius's] episcopate, his brother Ermes wrote a book in which are contained the precepts which the angel delivered to him, coming to him in the guise of a Shepherd." (c) "Then, after him, Pius, whose brother according to the flesh was Hermas, the angelic shepherd, because he spoke the words given to him.

Hermas used citations from Gospel of St. John, Ephesians, Hebrews and other Pauline Epistles, and I Peter. But the books he most certainly and most often uses are the Epistle of St. James and the Apocalypse.

The followings are some questions of criticism of the Shepherd of Hermas:

QUESTION (1)

Hermas in his visions,

In his second Vision he sees an old women and later in the vision he get to know that is the church, so I am a confuse about the church because I always thought the church is we as a Christian people, so how can he sees the church?

In his vision Hermas saw the church as an old woman, young woman and a strong woman. Each state of these visions is a symbol which refers to a specific character of the church. And so the old woman refers to the church which was in God's thought before creation of the world and for her everything is created and Heavens and earth pronounce her glory which is the same of God's Glory. The young woman refers to the strength of the church as it is established on Christ Who is the Cornerstone and so the church does not know aging or death so it will remain young forever. The strong woman refers to the endurance of the church for persecution and torture so although the church faced and faces torture and persecutions, she will remain strong forever as Christ protects her all time.

So all of these visions should not be understood literally but instead should be understood spiritually. Yes, literally the church involves the true believers of Christ as the church in the meaning is

the body of Christ, this is literally. But spiritually, Hermas' visions showed some of the characters of this church which denote God's love for every one of us. In conclusion, the church was in God's thought before creation of world and for her everything is created (old woman), she will remain young never know aging or death (young woman) and will remain strong whatever persecutions or tortures (strong woman).

QUESTION (2)

In third Vision in last part he said,

But I, shameless as I yet was, asked her, "Is repentance possible for all those stones which have been cast away and did not fit into the building of the tower, and will they yet have a place in this tower?"

"Repentance," said she, "is yet possible, but in this tower they cannot find a suitable place. But in another and much inferior place they will be laid, and that, too, only when they have been tortured and completed the days of their sins. And on this account will they be transferred, because they have partaken of the righteous Word. And then only will they be removed from their punishments when the thought of repenting of the evil deeds which they have done has come into their hearts. But if it does not come into their hearts, they will not be saved, on account of the hardness of their heart

What she means by in another place? What is the other place? How they will be saved with repentance after death?

To answer the question, two points should be clarified first:

1. The tower here refers to the church on the earth and each stone in this tower is a symbol of each one of the true believers of Christ. Each believer here on the earth has his own talents that God gave him and with all other believers one homogenous perfect tower is built and this tower appears as it is built of one stone only. "...built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner [stone]; In whom all the building fitly framed together growth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are built together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." (Ephesians 2:21)
2. At Hermas' time, there were some teachers in the church who taught that there is no repentance after baptism and everyone who sins after baptism has no place for repentance, no place in heavens and so must be excommunicated from the church. But according to the orthodox faith that taught by Christ Himself and His righteous Apostles, the door of repentance will remain open till the last moment of person's life as we saw the right thief repented in the last moment of his life and The Lord accepted his repentance. So Hermas here in his vision tried to convince those non-orthodox teachers by their mistakes in this teaching and clarify and support the orthodox teaching regarding repentance after baptism.
3. Upon the points I mentioned before, it is clear now what this vision means: (a) death by water means baptism, without which no body can go to heavens (John 3:5, Romans 6:4 and verse 75, 76 of Hermas' vision "75. And what are the rest which fell by the water, and could not roll into the water? 76. They are such as have heard the word and were willing to be baptized in the name of the Lord, but considering the great holiness which the truth requires, have withdrawn themselves and walked again after their wicked lusts"). (b) So saving after death which means here now baptism is possible by true repentance about our sins and lusts that we did after our death with Christ in baptism and doing good deeds. (c) By our true repentance and our good deeds The Lord will return us again to his tower (the church) to be only one complete perfect tower that appears as made of one single stone.
4. So we saw now Hermas tried to correct the non-orthodox faith at his time which stated repentance is impossible after baptism (death with Christ) and he taught through his vision that the door of repentance will still open before everyone after baptism (death with Christ) till the last moment of person's life. It is the mercy and love of God, for His Holy Name, the praise and glory. Amen.