

THE TYNDALE HOUSE BULLETIN

Issued twice yearly by the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research,

Tyndale House, Selwyn Gardens, Cambridge.

Price to non-members : Is. 3d. per copy, post free.

No.3

SUMMER, 1957

JAMES i.18 AND THE OFFERING OF FIRST-FRUITS

F. H. Palmer

From certain circles there has come an interpretation of Jas. i.18 which makes the verse teach the eventual salvation of all men. The basis of this interpretation is confessedly Westcott's thesis that in the Old Testament offering of first-fruits the part offered was thought of as sanctifying the whole. So 'the Church . . . forms the covenant people of the new order, the first fruits of God's renewed creation (Jas, i.18) in which "the open consecration of a part marks the destiny of the whole" (Westcott).' (J. A. T. Robinson in *The Historic Episcopate*, ed. K. M. Carey, 1954).

It is our contention that this interpretation of Jas. i.18 has but flimsy evidence in its support, on two grounds.

1. Westcott's thesis on first-fruits seems to be a reading back of a concept which appears in Paul (Rom. xi.16 'if the *aparache* be holy, so is the *phurama*') into the Old Testament. In none of the classic Old Testament passages on first-fruits is there mention of the significance of the offering on the rest of the crop. The offerings are demanded by God as His due portion, and are to be used for the support of the priesthood (Nu. xviii.13; 2 Ki. iv.42). They are God's tithe (Ne. xiii.5), and to deprive Him of His right is plain theft (Mal. iii.8).

First-fruits and first-born are closely allied words both having the same Hebrew root *bkr*, and we find exactly the same thought lying behind the latter word. The first-born 'are mine' (Ex. xiii.2), but the Levites are taken in their stead (Nu. iii.41) as God's portion. Here is no thought of the sanctification of the rest by the offering of the first; rather the opposite, that the offering of God's portion frees from taboo the rest of the people or of the harvest, that they or it may be employed for secular use. This is confirmed by the Mishna Bikkurim (ii.5): 'Bikkurim, before it has been set apart, renders forbidden what is on the threshing-floor.' This seems quite clear. The offering is God's share of the harvest, and far from sanctifying the rest of the crop by being offered, it frees it from the need to be offered, and renders it lawful food.

In the New Testament Rom. xi.16 is the only case where Westcott's interpretation is certainly the one to be taken.

2. *aparache* is a much wider word in its meaning than has been readily assumed. It is used for more than first-fruits in the purely technical sense. Certainly it is regularly used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew *hikkurim* (but no more than is *protogennemata*), but it also translates three other words used for offering, *terumoth*, *reshith* and *helebh*, and is far from being the exclusive word to translate any of these. Sometimes the translators seem to have employed it simply as a word for 'offering' (cf. Ex. xxxviii.24, the gold of the *aparaches*'), sometimes to mean 'chief' or 'best of' (cf. Nu. xviii passim; Dt. xxxiii.21; Ps. lxxviii.51, cv.36). To the Hebrew, primacy in time meant primacy of rank. It was the first-born who had the birthright. So *aparache* came to mean anything from 'of prime quality' to simply *ho protos* in time, with usually, but not always, the thought of an offering in the forefront. It is a word of very wide significance in the LXX.

Moulton and Milligan quote various uses, including a most interesting one for death duties. Here the payment of the *aparache* is hardly a guarantee that the rest of the estate will follow!

If the background of the offering of first-fruits and of the Greek word *aparche* is as we have contended, then to claim that Jas. i.18 teaches universalism is surely overstepping the mark, and reading some unintended subtlety into the mind of James.

Liverpool

F. H. PALMER.