

CORRESPONDENCE

JOHN OWEN ON EARLY BRITISH CHRISTIANITY

Dr. Westcott continues debate with Prof. Lee.

In his letter (B.R.J. 9) Prof. F.N. Lee protests that "never so much as once did I mention John Owen in my B.R.J articles" and adds that thus he is "quite at a loss to understand why Dr. Westcott has appealed precisely to Owen...to protest what he has called 'early myth and legend' in my B.R.J. articles."

If any readers should find themselves equally at a loss it might bear explanation that Professor Lee's articles appeared just at the time of the publication of John Owen's "Biblical Theology", on which I had been working for some years, and I was at once struck with the fact that this great British theologian *had* examined the literary claims for early Christianity in Britain, and *had* declared most of them to be legendary and deceptive, over three centuries ago. As one for whom Owen is an authority to be respected, it seemed rather sad that some of the same stories were still being offered as sober fact at the end of the twentieth century. After all another 'modern' writer could say (in another context); "As is so often the case, the most thorough-going treatment of this question comes from the pen of John Owen" (Victor Budgen, "The Charismatics and the Word of God", 1985, page 137). We are all indebted to Prof. Lee for the copious extracts he gives us out of Owen's truly voluminous writings (we are grateful to read or be reminded of anything from Owen's pen), but surely quotations in which Owen refers to the then commonly held mythology do not necessarily prove his own settled opinions and conclusions on the matter! To illustrate, I have seen Spurgeon quoted as a pre-millennialist, and again Spurgeon quoted as a post-millennialist - on the basis of references culled from his voluminous sermons material. But if Spurgeon had sat down to examine that very subject, and deliberately given us his mature conclu-

sions, (sady, so far as I am aware he did not) there should be no doubt about Spurgeon's eschatology! My point (to the editor, and later in correspondence with Prof. Lee) is that, whatever he mentions *in passim* elsewhere, within his 'Theologoumena Pantadapa' ('Biblical Theology') Owen *does* set out to deliberately assess the written evidence for early Christianity in Britain, and so surely *here* and *nowhere else* is his mature thought and deliberate and final conclusions on the matter. It was my concern that Prof. Lee had not had access to this newly translated material which prompted me to forward the extracts from that translation which he kindly mentions in his letter. Having explained why and how John Owen appeared in the case, and as many of the B.R.J. readers will not have the advantage of having read Owen's final conclusions on the matter, perhaps I may be allowed to quote from that work? What is perhaps the key element in the disputed 'history' concerns a British "King Lucius" - said to be the ruler of all (or at least a large part of) the island - and his claimed conversion to Christianity. Says John Owen; "Many are the writers who have claimed that a King Lucius was the first British ruler to embrace the faith. (He is said to be the author of a letter to Pope Eleutherius - there is even extant a reply!) *If you wish my opinion I would point out that just as many have claimed that Philip the Arabian was the first Christian Emperor!* If I may speak freely, as befits a man for whom *nothing comes before the truth*, I have long doubted the accuracy, *if not of the whole Lucius story*, at least of the correspondence and other things that are tacked on to it" (p.331); "Galfridas gives a long account of the happy outcome (i.e. of Lucius' conversion)..this is his story, *which I judge to be the tale of a man who is a stranger to both common*

sense and shame" (p.332); "Ball adds that Lucius was later consecrated Bishop and undertook to convert men to the faith. Other scholars refute this, saying that Lucius never set foot out of his own (local) kingdom, dying at Colchester in the 12th year of his reign. The learned Camden...strangely surrenders to the *general misconception*;" (p.333); " By reconstructing the history of that period from the most reliable sources he demonstrates that from the time when Claudius incorporated the island into the Roman Empire conditions were always such that there simply *was no room for a native king* (such as this *imaginary* Lucius). Despite all this, he still 'prudently' decides that the story should find a place in his book, even though his own account of history and chronology *cries out for its banishment* - such is the labour needed to *uproot* a belief so deeply rooted and so long held, from people's minds ! However, if my readers will simply grant the reasonable request that they be willing to approach the subject *with open minds*, then I have no doubts about persuading all true students that I (along with many others) have *compelling reasons for rejecting it*" (p.333); "I must admit that (slow of intellect as I may be) I see *absolutely no place for Lucius to be fitted in* as king over the whole island. It is more likely that he *never existed* in Britain at all" (p. 336); "to imagine....such a king as this Lucius (as he is presented in the *supposed Letter to Eleutherius* by that champion entertainer Galfridius!) betrays minds *enslaved to prejudice*" (p.338); " the letter (i.e. to Pope Elutherius), of course lacks all evidence of antiquity.(Elsewhere that *fraudulent* Elutherius). We shall not deny the possibility that a certain Lucius, possibly of royal descent, and possibly enjoying some prestige amongst the Britons, did at this time become a convert to Christianity, and make every effort to further the faith here. But, with equal candor, it cannot be denied that it is *merely the tale-spinners* who have transformed him into a great king (and also, presumably, one without issue, as no-one succeeded him in his kingdom!) and therefore that the so-called Letter to Eleutherius *is a mere forgery*. That cannot be denied by anyone who is able to free

their thinking from the hold of *ancient prejudice*, to the impartial weighing of the truth", (p.341). THUS SPAKE DR. JOHN OWEN IN 1661.(All taken from "Biblical Theology", Book III, Chapt. 11, "The Origin and Progress of Idolatry, Continued", emphasis added.).

In my original letter I mentioned also "Jewish-Christian Druids" etc., because Owen has a lot which is certainly less than complimentary to say about *them* in that same work (e.g. "The most notable feature of Druid sacrifices, as recorded by *reliable authors* was that of human sacrifice) (p.328); "It was because of these sorts of abominable sacrifices that the Romans attempted to exterminate the Druid religion" (p.329), with the crushing conclusion that these records serve to "demonstrate how great *slaves to Satan* we Britons once were" (p. 329)!

Now let us be clear - the point of debate in this correspondence is NOT what is or is not the true version of early Christianity in the British Isles, not is it one of the weight or otherwise to put on the 'traditional/mythological' stories concerning it which have come down to us. Rather it IS simply whether or not A) "JOHN OWEN EXAMINED (these legends) AT LENGTH SOME THREE CENTURIES AGO" and B) whether or not, in so doing "HE DEMOLISHED THEM WITH HIS USUAL THOROUGHNESS", and thus, by implication C) whether DR. STEPHEN WESTCOTT WAS, OR WAS NOT JUSTIFIED IN SO COMMENTING TO THE (then) B.R.JOURNAL EDITOR ? The 'Biblical Theology' is exactly where Owen sets out to examine this subject, deliberately and directly, and there he gives us his considered and mature conclusions. You have them above. Will any candid reader not now agree that (so far as those precise questions are concerned) there can remain no fair doubt about our authors real opinions, or that my reference to his conclusions was legitimate and justified ? Or that the correspondence re. Owen should now take its end ?

I cannot conclude, however, without here acknowledging that I am grateful for a stimulating and (to me at least!) beneficial exchange of ideas and information

with Professor Lee, following my original letter to the editor. We have ranged widely over matters from the correct birth place of Patrick [which we have *jointly* determined to be just south of Hadrian's Wall, taking Patrick's own reference in the uncials of his 'Confessio' as BONA VENTA BERNIAE rather than the traditional BONAVENTABERNIAE, and so substituting for an unknown location a perfectly reasonable descriptive place-name; the station or farm at the waters (Berniae) through the pass (Venta) leading to Bona - the latter being the well known station on Hadrian's Wall], through the claims about Noah's Ark remaining on Mount Ararat (the professors 1983 monograph "Ararat Archaeology", kindly supplied, is a mine of information, and changed my thinking on some aspects of *that* subject!) to the fascinating possibility of Lollard Protestant influence behind the early English exploration of North America (via the Society of Merchant Adventurers of Bristol. One John Ameryck may even have given his name to that 'new world'!). It would thus be a shame if the B.R.F. members and journal readers were to miss the really important point in all this, so far as early British Christianity is concerned. John Owen, Professor Lee and myself *all* agree closely that these British Islands did enjoy a wonderful measure of Spiritual blessing in their early (Roman and sub-Roman) days, so that the gospel might almost be said to have found its 'second home' here, and that this original and pure Christianity of the Celtic Church, after sustaining a long battle with Romanist aggression was at length driven underground, but never extinguished, to surface again in Lollardism, and at length pave the way for the Reformation in Britain. Nowhere is the Roman taunt; "Where was your religion before Luther?" less applicable than here in Britain! As evangelical and Reformed folk we *have* been robbed of our history! Within this large measure of agreement what I sense is a difference of *approach*. The Professor is mainly employing *literary* sources, I *archaeological*. And that is quite understandable, for Prof. Lee has

spent much of his life away from his native land (I have discovered that he and I were born quite near to each other in the north of England), whilst I have been involved in 'dirt-archaeology' and Romano-British studies. I know that if we allow too generous a credence to the legends which have come down to us (a Pauline visit, Joseph of Arimathea, King Lucius - even a visit by our Lord Himself!) we will inevitably have to fit the known archaeology of the Province around these 'facts'. What is more, we have then to weigh the comparative value of the traditions, make value judgments, and assess the existence or otherwise of 'Roman propaganda' (e.g. regard to the Druids) in the Latin sources which have survived. On the other hand, it seems to me that the archaeology of the Roman Province is very well known, and the Latin literary sources fit well in with that. So also the immediate 'sub-Roman' phase, down to the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, though more literary barren, is reasonably well documented archaeologically. The problem is that the 'legends' don't fit that pattern. What I find intriguing and exciting is *not* how we might best read these back into Romano-British history, but rather the *existence of these legends at all!* You see faith - a real, living, genuine personal faith is not archaeologically traceable! Paganism leaves temple ruins and grave-goods, true Christianity neither. As a result the standard textbooks on Roman Britain say little about Christianity, and most people are left with the vague impression that its arrival had something to do with 'Augustine the Monk' and his fair-haired slave children 'not Angles but Angels' in the end of the sixth century. The mediaeval Church was clearly quite aware that Christianity had flourished in earlier days here, in Roman and sub-Roman Britain. But that was the high-noon of Saints and 'miracles' - the age of hagiography. So our mediaeval chroniclers used Joseph, Paul, and Christ Himself as literary devices to explain (in typical Romanist-Mediaeval fashion) a *known phenomena* - that of a long pre-existence of Christianity in these Islands. At the same time, genuine personalities who had

never been forgotten (Patrick, Columba, Ninian) began to gather the legendary and miraculous accretions typical of the middle ages. This factor (to me-I know that Prof. Lee disagrees) sufficiently accounts for such reports as the story of 'king Lucius' or the visit of Joseph of Arimathea (n.b. Charles Thomas, in his definitive *"Christianity in Roman Britain"*, publ. Batsford 1981, further accounts for the 'Lucius' legend in this way; "easily explained is the tale of Lucius, a British king, whose second-century appeal for the grace of conversion, addressed to Eleutherius, Pope c. 174 - 189, was incorporated in Bede's 'Historia'. It has been shown to be a muddled version of a Papal contact with another Lucius, prince of Edessa, older *Birtha* or *Britio Edessenorum* hence its ascription to Britannia". Elsewhere Thomas adds; "Though...Our Lord, Saint Paul, and Joseph of Arimathea are historical, the supposition that they personally visited Britain - during the first century A.D.- underlies a corpus of picturesque myths of uncertain age, possibly mediaeval as we have them" : *Thomas op cit* : pages 41 - 42). Concerning the Joseph of Arimathea legend, it is well to remember that the primary source is William of Malmesbury (c. 1090 - 1143) who, in his *"Gesta Pontificum Anglorum"* (1125), tells how Joseph and his company; "built a Church in honour of the blessed Virgin, in a place to which they were supernaturally directed, the walls of which were made of ossiers twisted together...this being the first Church in the island, it was honoured with the particular distinction of *being dedicated to the Virgin Mary*". It is precisely this story, taken as sober fact, which underlies the Papal dedication of Britain as "Mary's Dowry", which was reaffirmed by none other than Pope John Paul II at Wembley in May, 1982. A 19th century writer commenting on Joseph of Arimathea's mission, points out that: "No mention is made of it by Gildas, Bede, Asserius, Marianus Scotus, nor any of the earliest writers", and he adds that a manuscript in the Vatican which *does* credit Joseph with a missionary visit to Britain calmly points out that in his retinue were: "Lazarus, Mary Magdalen, and Martha" (James Yeowell, *Chronicles of the Ancient British Church*

'London 1847). Enough said ! I mention these only to show that we have here something far wider and rather more modern than just "Dr. Westcott's perception *largely if not exclusively only* of the seventeenth century Owen"! But if early (pure and Apostolic) Christianity did not arrive here via one or two spectacular 'super-saints' how did it arrive ? I believe the answer is clear - in just exactly the way genuine Christianity usually spreads, by the evangelism of humble and obscure pastors, and the faithful, covenantal, witness of Christian lay-folk ! And if the success they achieved, and the numbers they gathered are not archaeologically traceable on earth (though, surely, well known in heaven !) rather what excites and encourages me is the few but very meaningful *HINTS* left behind, observable by the Spiritually aware investigator. A Roman lady buried at York with no grave goods, but with her hair dressed as if to meet her bridegroom, and those tresses held with a bone comb bearing the simple legend: "AVE SORER, VIVAT IN DEO" (roughly : 'Rejoice, Sister ! You are alive with God!'), or the sub-Roman pastor whose tombstone may be seen in the Cardiff museum-claiming only the Biblical title of Presbyter- 'lying surrounded by his flock' the scratched 'SATOR - ROTAS' acrostic from Cirencester, the "Celtic" Church amongst the sand dunes near Gwithian in Cornwall, the rough stone baptismal fonts ploughed up in lowland Scotland, where no modern Church stands. These, plus the records of the few genuine characters which have been spared to us (when shorn of legendary accretions) are the stuff from which we can recreate our great ancestry and true evangelical history. I merely and humbly submit that paying too much attention to mediaeval hagiography - the temptation to take the legends at face value rather than as evidence for and indicators of a pre-Romanist, pre-mediaeval stratum behind them-we are in danger of failing to recover our true history (which agreed-we have NOT been taught at school !) and substituting (at least in part) a 'Christianised' mythology for a paganised one. **Stephen Westcott Ph.D.**
Bristol, April 1995.

From Mr. J.V.Reynolds,
Highland Bible Bookshop,
Lochcarron, SCOTLAND.

Dear Mr. Editor,

It was kind of you to point out , in your Jan - Mar. issue of your magazine, that Nolan's "Inquiry into the Integrity of the Received Text" is available from the Highland Bible Bookshop; but sadly the updated price did not get included in the Review.

I would like to point out to your readers that the price as at 28th March 1995 (subject to alteration) is (in English sterling) £23.50 plus post and packing.

I would also mention that the advertisement you put in, without my request, may perhaps have given the impression to your readers that the Highland Bible Bookshop is sympathetic to the distinctives of the "Protestant Reformed Churches"; but this is not the case (even though I have known you personally, Mr. Editor, for a number of years), as I am of the Anglo-Scottish Reformed Tradition, and am a member of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

I will leave official spokesperson(s) of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland (if they so think fit) to comment on the remarks about that Denomination in the same issue of the British Reformed Journal

Yours sincerely,

J.V.Reynolds (Proprietor)
Highland Bible Bookshop

EDITOR'S REPLY :

We are grateful to Mr. Reynolds for his updated information with respect to the price of "Nolan's Inquiry", and trust that our readers will not only take note, but also take the opportunity to purchase this very rare production, which, so far as we know, is not available in the British Isles through any other agency than that of the Highland Bible Bookshop. This applies too to the many other extremely useful volumes which Mr. Reynolds lists on his catalogue.

We are, however, a little saddened, and mystified, as to Mr. Reynolds' comments concerning the free advertisement we carried for his bookshop in our 'News Alert'.

British Reformed Journal

This, like all the other advertisements carried therein, was provided gratis and by consent, none were provided by request. It was the Editor's concern that readers of the Journal should have their attention brought to the availability of important and scarce literature concerning the Received Text, literature which would be unavailable from other sources.

As to the matter of appearing to be "sympathetic to the distinctives" of the Protestant Reformed Churches, no such implication was ever intended, or inferred by us. When a paper carries an advertisement, it is intended as a benefit for its readers, not an announcement to say that the advertiser is in full support of that paper's editorial policy. When a church or Christian Organization advertises in the secular press, one presumes that they do not thereby endorse all "the distinctives" of that press. But it is noteworthy that Mr. Reynolds, whom we know to be a godly and sincere man, felt it necessary to issue this disclaimer. Like thousands of other sincere and zealous Reformed Christians, he finds that somehow he must not be seen to be open to any inference that he might be "sympathetic to the distinctives of the Protestant Reformed Churches". One sees here the resultant effects of the anti-Protestant Reformed propaganda that has so intensely attacked that denomination and cast them, unjustly, in the role of 'hyper-calvinist pariahs'. Mr. Reynolds is not to be blamed for what he has written, he has in all this, I know, acted for what he sees as the truth, and I trust that all our readers will respect him for that. Sad, it is though that those who are responsible for leadership in various "Reformed" quarters have fostered this sort of situation.

Association with the BRF will, too, get a man into trouble, and we will doubtless suffer the kind of vituperation and misrepresentation that the PR Churches, and others, like Dr. Gordon C. Clark, Dr Schilder, and many more have suffered. But let us remember to exercise a readiness to forgive, and a spirit of supplication for all those who regard us as, in some way, "pariahs" from whom they must keep their distance.