
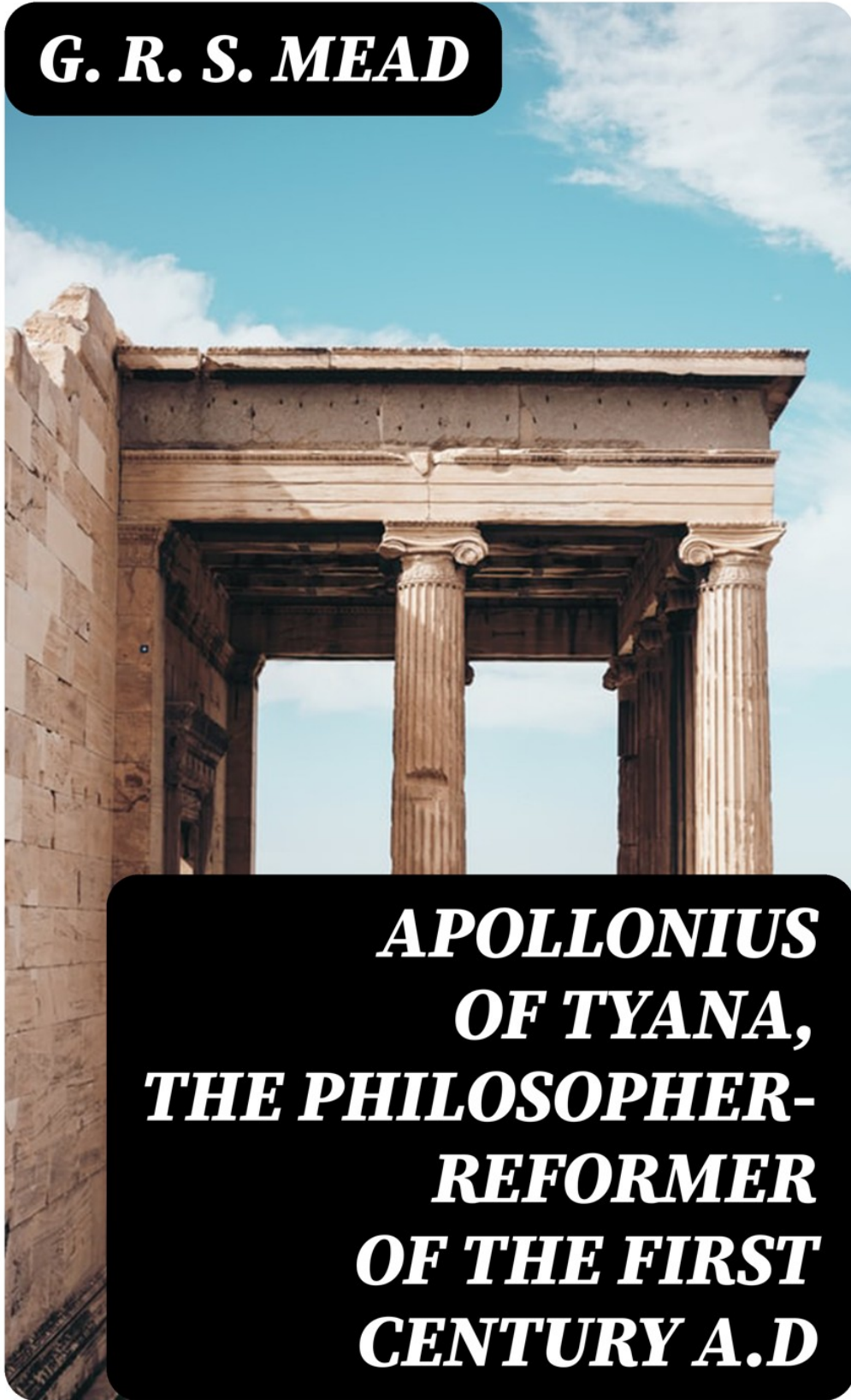


G. R. S. MEAD



***APOLLONIUS
OF TYANA,
THE PHILOSOPHER-
REFORMER
OF THE FIRST
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Apollonius of Tyana, the Philosopher-Reformer of the First Century A.D

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SECTION I.

INTRODUCTORY.

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To the student of the origins of Christianity there is naturally no period of Western history of greater interest and importance than the first century of our era; and yet how little comparatively is known about it of a really definite and reliable nature. If it be a subject of lasting regret that no non-Christian writer of the first century had sufficient intuition of the future to record even a line of information concerning the birth and growth of what was to be the religion of the Western world, equally disappointing is it to find so little definite information of the general social and religious conditions of the time. The rulers and the wars of the Empire seem to have formed the chief interest of the historiographers of the succeeding century, and even in this department of political history, though the public acts of the Emperors may be fairly well known, for we can check them by records and inscriptions, when we come to their private acts and motives we find ourselves no longer on the ground of history, but for the most part in the atmosphere of prejudice, scandal, and speculation. The political acts of Emperors and their officers, however, can at best throw but a dim side-light on the general social conditions of the time, while they shed no light at all on the religious conditions, except so far as these in any particular contacted the domain of politics. As well might we seek to reconstruct a picture of the religious life of the time from Imperial acts

and rescripts, as endeavour to glean any idea of the intimate religion of this country from a perusal of statute books or reports of Parliamentary debates.

The Roman histories so-called, to which we have so far been accustomed, cannot help us in the reconstruction of a picture of the environment into which, on the one hand, Paul led the new faith in Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome; and in which, on the other, it already found itself in the districts bordering on the south-east of the Mediterranean. It is only by piecing together laboriously isolated scraps of information and fragments of inscriptions, that we become aware of the existence of the life of a world of religious associations and private cults which existed at this period. Not that even so we have any very direct information of what went on in these associations, guilds, and brotherhoods; but we have sufficient evidence to make us keenly regret the absence of further knowledge.

Difficult as this field is to till, it is exceedingly fertile in interest, and it is to be regretted that comparatively so little work has as yet been done in it; and that, as is so frequently the case, the work which has been done is, for the most part, not accessible to the English reader. What work has been done on this special subject may be seen from the bibliographical note appended to this essay, in which is given a list of books and articles treating of the religious associations among the Greeks and Romans. But if we seek to obtain a general view of the condition of religious affairs in the first century we find ourselves without a reliable guide; for of works dealing with this particular subject there are few, and from them we learn little that does not

immediately concern, or is thought to concern, Christianity; whereas, it is just the state of the non-Christian religious world about which, in the present case, we desire to be informed.

If, for instance, the reader turn to works of general history, such as Merivale's *History of the Romans under the Empire* (London; last ed. 1865), he will find, it is true, in chap. iv., a description of the state of religion up to the death of Nero, but he will be little wiser for perusing it. If he turn to Hermann Schiller's *Geschichte der römischen Kaiserreichs unter der Regierung des Nero* (Berlin; 1872), he will find much reason for discarding the vulgar opinions about the monstrous crimes imputed to Nero, as indeed he might do by reading in English G. H. Lewes' article "Was Nero a Monster?" (*Cornhill Magazine*; July, 1863)—and he will also find (bk. IV. chap. iii.) a general view of the religion and philosophy of the time which is far more intelligent than that of Merivale's; but all is still very vague and unsatisfactory, and we feel ourselves still outside the intimate life of the philosophers and religionists of the first century.

If, again, he turn to the latest writers of Church history who have treated this particular question, he will find that they are occupied entirely with the contact of the Christian Church with the Roman Empire, and only incidentally give us any information of the nature of which we are in search. On this special ground C. J. Neumann, in his careful study *Der römische Staat und die allgemeine Kirche bis auf Diocletian* (Leipzig; 1890), is interesting; while Prof. W. M. Ramsay, in *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170* (London;

1893), is extraordinary, for he endeavours to interpret Roman history by the New Testament documents, the dates of the majority of which are so hotly disputed.

But, you may say, what has all this to do with Apollonius of Tyana? The answer is simple: Apollonius lived in the first century; his work lay precisely among these religious associations, colleges, and guilds. A knowledge of them and their nature would give us the natural environment of a great part of his life; and information as to their condition in the first century would perhaps help us the better to understand some of the reasons for the task which he attempted.

If, however, it were only the life and endeavours of Apollonius which would be illuminated by this knowledge, we could understand why so little effort has been spent in this direction; for the character of the Tyanean, as we shall see, has since the fourth century been regarded with little favour even by the few, while the many have been taught to look upon our philosopher not only as a charlatan, but even as an anti-Christ. But when it is just a knowledge of these religious associations and orders which would throw a flood of light on the earliest evolution of Christianity, not only with regard to the Pauline communities, but also with regard to those schools which were subsequently condemned as heretical, it is astonishing that we have had no more satisfactory work done on the subject.

It may be said, however, that this information is not forthcoming simply because it is unprocurable. To a large extent this is true; nevertheless, a great deal more could be done than has as yet been attempted, and the results of

research in special directions and in the byways of history could be combined, so that the non-specialist could obtain some general idea of the religious conditions of the times, and so be less inclined to join in the now stereotyped condemnation of all non-Jewish or non-Christian moral and religious effort in the Roman Empire of the first century.

But the reader may retort: Things social and religious in those days must have been in a very parlous state, for, as this essay shows, Apollonius himself spent the major part of his life in trying to reform the institutions and cults of the Empire. To this we answer: No doubt there was much to reform, and when is there not? But it would not only be not generous, but distinctly mischievous for us to judge our fellows of those days solely by the lofty standard of an ideal morality, or even to scale them against the weight of our own supposed virtues and knowledge. Our point is not that there was nothing to reform, far from that, but that the wholesale accusations of depravity brought against the times will not bear impartial investigation. On the contrary, there was much good material ready to be worked up in many ways, and if there had not been, how could there among other things have been any Christianity?

The Roman Empire was at the zenith of its power, and had there not been many admirable administrators and men of worth in the governing caste, such a political consummation could never have been reached and maintained. Moreover, as ever previously in the ancient world, religious liberty was guaranteed, and where we find persecution, as in the reigns of Nero and Domitian, it must be set down to political and not to theological reasons.

Setting aside the disputed question of the persecution of the Christians under Domitian, the Neronian persecution was directed against those whom the Imperial power regarded as Jewish political revolutionaries. So, too, when we find the philosophers imprisoned or banished from Rome during these two reigns, it was not because they were philosophers, but because the ideal of some of them was the restoration of the Republic, and this rendered them obnoxious to the charge not only of being political malcontents, but also of actively plotting against the Emperor's *majestas*. Apollonius, however, was throughout a warm supporter of monarchical rule. When, then, we hear of the philosophers being banished from Rome or being cast into prison, we must remember that this was not a wholesale persecution of philosophy throughout the Empire; and when we say that some of them desired to restore the Republic, we should remember that the vast majority of them refrained from politics, and especially was this the case with the disciples of the religio-philosophical schools.

SECTION II.

THE RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS AND COMMUNITIES OF THE FIRST CENTURY.

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In the domain of religion it is quite true that the state cults and national institutions throughout the Empire were almost without exception in a parlous state, and it is to be

noticed that Apollonius devoted much time and labour to reviving and purifying them. Indeed, their strength had long left the general state-institutions of religion, where all was now perfunctory; but so far from there being no religious life in the land, in proportion as the official cultus and ancestral institutions afforded no real satisfaction to their religious needs, the more earnestly did the people devote themselves to private cults, and eagerly baptised themselves in all that flood of religious enthusiasm which flowed in with ever increasing volume from the East. Indubitably in all this fermentation there were many excesses, according to our present notions of religious decorum, and also grievous abuses; but at the same time in it many found due satisfaction for their religious emotions, and, if we except those cults which were distinctly vicious, we have to a large extent before us in popular circles the spectacle of what, in their last analysis, are similar phenomena to those enthusiasms which in our own day may be frequently witnessed among such sects as the Shakers or Ranters, and at the general revival meetings of the uneducated.

It is not, however, to be thought that the private cults and the doings of the religious associations were all of this nature or confined to this class; far from it. There were religious brotherhoods, communities, and clubs—*thiasí, erani,* and *orgeōnes*—of all sorts and conditions. There were also mutual benefit societies, burial clubs, and dining companies, the prototypes of our present-day Masonic bodies, Oddfellows, and the rest. These religious associations were not only private in the sense that they

were not maintained by the State, but also for the most part they were private in the sense that what they did was kept secret, and this is perhaps the main reason why we have so defective a record of them.

Among them are to be numbered not only the lower forms of mystery-cultus of various kinds, but also the greater ones, such as the Phrygian, Bacchic, Isiac, and Mithriac Mysteries, which were spread everywhere throughout the Empire. The famous Eleusinia were, however, still under the ægis of the State, but though so famous were, as a state-cultus, far more perfunctory.

It is, moreover, not to be thought that the great types of mystery-cultus above mentioned were uniform even among themselves. There were not only various degrees and grades within them, but also in all probability many forms of each line of tradition, good, bad, and indifferent. For instance, we know that it was considered *de rigueur* for every respectable citizen of Athens to be initiated into the Eleusinia, and therefore the tests could not have been very stringent; whereas in the most recent work on the subject, *De Apuleio Isiacorum Mysteriorum Teste* (Leyden; 1900), Dr. K. H. E. De Jong shows that in one form of the Isiac Mysteries the candidate was invited to initiation by means of dream; that is to say, he had to be psychically impressionable before his acceptance.

Here, then, we have a vast intermediate ground for religious exercise between the most popular and undisciplined forms of private cults and the highest forms, which could only be approached through the discipline and training of the philosophic life. The higher side of these