

Ahasver "der ewige Jude". . . .
Eduard König
The Princeton Theological Review 8:345-346. [1910]

Dr. König, the well-known Old Testament scholar, traces in this brochure with his usual thoroughness the original significance of the story of "The Wandering Jew" and the varying literary uses to which it has been put, especially in modern times. He decides that the version of it contained in the book published in 1602 (ostensibly, but not really, at Leyden by Christoff Creutzer) is independent of the story as given by the monk Roger of St. Albans in his chronicle for the year 1228 concerning Cartaphilus, and of the tale of Guido Bonatti of Forli concerning one Johannes Buttadeus, also of the 13th century. This decision is connected with the other conclusion arrived at, that the story is not a legend but a myth, does not rest on any historical basis but embodies an idea, so that it could emerge with identical import, and even partial resemblance in detail, yet without historical interdependence, at various times. The idea which finds expression in the myth is "religionsgeschichtlich", viz., that the Jewish people in result of its treatment of Christ must wander until He shall come, which latter clause carries at least the implication of their ultimate return to favor. Dr. König has his own peculiar explanation of the new emergence and increased circulation of the tale at the close of the sixteenth century. This explanation is connected with the name borne by the wandering Jew in this version, that of Ahasueros. The fact that this is the pure Hebrew and not the Graecized or Latinized form points to derivation of the name from the Jews, and this leads him to offer the hypothesis that the story arose at that time as an answer on the part of Christians to the prevailing Jewish custom of cursing at the feast of Purim, in connection with the reading of the Book of Esther, not only Haman, but all sorts of heretics, Persians, Mohammedans and Christians. This hypothesis seems plausible enough, at least it may stand in default of something better, for, even if one should not be convinced by Dr. König's argument as to the entire independence of the Ahasueros version of the older Cartaphilos and Buttadeus versions, the substitution of the new name needs at any rate to be accounted for.

The second half of the booklet gives an account of the role played by the wandering Jew in modern literature. König shows that the use to which it has been put has been in many cases downright abuse, entirely out of touch with the true import of the figure. Pantheistic, pessimistic, materialistic, politico-messianic ideas have been foisted upon it. It is interesting to know that Goethe, Wilhelm Hauff, A.W. Schlegel, Schubert, Seidl and one of the old songs in "Des Knaben Wunderhorn" have given the poetic interpretation of the story that is most faithful to its original significance.