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The Evangelical Quarterly

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WHO WROTE THE GOSPELS?

I

LET me say at once that this paper is to be a plea for old-fashioned views of the authorship of the Gospels, a plea that these views are more reasonable, and demand less credulity than recent opinions and theories.

The various views and theories as to the authorship of the Gospels fall roughly into three groups. There is first of all the traditional view, namely, that they were written by the four men whose names are generally attached to them—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Secondly there are the various earlier theories of the Higher Criticism which hold that they were written as continuous sketches of Christ's ministry by authors working on the writings of earlier scribes, as is suggested by the preface of what we call the Gospel according to Luke. Thirdly there is the most recent type—what is called Form Criticism—according to which the contents of the Gospels are collections of sayings of Jesus which were in current use among early preachers and evangelists, which are arranged in the four Gospels without any thought of chronological sequence.

The second and third types of theory have come into existence as the result of various attempts to account for the similarities and dissimilarities between the Gospels as wholes and still more in the details of individual incidents and sayings. This is especially true in reference to the Synoptic Gospels. Why, for instance, have Mark and Matthew left out the large section which is peculiar to Luke with the great parable of the Prodigal Son in the heart of it; or why have not the synoptics any account of the raising of Lazarus or the wonderful words in John xiii-xvii? Such inquiries are very natural and legitimate subjects for study. The question before us is, which seems the

most reasonable explanation. Is it the solution offered by the adherents of Groups Two and Three, or is the old-fashioned view equally reasonable, if not indeed simpler and more natural?

The second set of views which I have mentioned—the earlier theories of the Higher Criticism—are all based on the supposition—expressed or assumed—that the authors of the Synoptic Gospels were each compiling his book out of earlier written materials as their authorities or sources. They are thought of as proceeding as a modern student of to-day would do in a study of a period of history. And it is not to be wondered at that students, bookworms most of them who have had very little touch with men—should think so. Besides, they have some excuse for thinking so in view of what stands in Luke's preface. He begins his Gospel by saying, "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which were from the beginning eye-witnesses and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things which thou hast believed". And what it was, he summarises in the preface to his second work, the Acts of the Apostles, "All that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day when He was taken up". That makes it plain that our four Gospels were not the only records of the sayings and doings of Jesus. Two or three others, Mark, Matthew and John,—even if John were then written—are not many; and Luke was familiar with them. There is nothing, therefore, to forbid the idea that Mark and Matthew were in the same position as Luke. But we are asked to think of each of three men, without personal acquaintance with Jesus, sitting down in his study with a number of these records before him and after careful collation of documents compiling his Gospel. I cannot believe our Gospels were written in that way.

What, however, is the upshot of the comparison of the different accounts of the same events by these writers, the language in which they agree, the words and phrases in which they differ? It is something like this. Both Matthew and Luke, to begin with, have used as a basis a writing very like our Mark's Gospel, but not quite identical with it. Possibly it was a first

draft, made by Mark himself, while the finished article—our Gospel—by a later hand was yet so akin to the original that it was entitled to be called the Gospel according to St. Mark. But Matthew and Luke have also both used another document which contained a great deal that is not to be found in Mark. This document, of unknown origin, has been christened Q. Why Q? Because Q is the first letter of *Quelle*, the German word for Source. Its contents were mainly reports of longer or shorter sayings or speeches of Jesus. These seem to have had a special interest for the author of what we call the Gospel according to St. Matthew of which, as it stands, for some reason which I do not understand, he cannot have been the author. But he may have been the author or part contributor to Q, and so the Gospel which derives so much from it may be called by his name. As for Luke, he seems to have had access not only to Q but to many other collections of sayings, and accounts of doings, and was more anxious to get all his information set down in correct chronological order than either of the other two. But again for reasons which I do not understand the author was not Paul's friend Luke, but someone of later date who made so much use of Luke's earlier work that it became the habit to give Luke's name to the third Gospel.

The curious thing about all this is that the only source of any information about these supposed originals or sources or Qs or their contents is from our four Gospels. Indeed it is only their supposed contents that we get there. There is not a hint of their separate existence, nothing reminiscent of the Old Testament "Are they not written in the books of the Kings of Judah?" One cannot but admire, though all unconvinced, the detective skill and canine sense with which they track their prey to its lair.

The authorship of the Fourth Gospel is for two reasons denied to the younger son of Zebedee. For one thing it is said to embody a Christology which would have required a much longer time to develop than is covered by John's lifetime. Yet here is the curious fact that Professor Ernest Scott, who holds this view, says also that the Christology of the Epistle to the Colossians, an Epistle which he regards as the work of the Apostle Paul, is identical with that of the Gospel according to John. The other objection is that Papias as quoted by Eusebius mentions a John the Presbyter or elder, and he, not John the

son of Zebedee may be the author. But it is an assumption that there are two Johns, though that is quite likely, and it is gratuitous to ascribe the Gospel to this otherwise unknown person of whom it is not said by Papias that he wrote the Gospel. The reference to the *Presbyter* John may quite well be to John the son of Zebedee, for as Peter says of himself, "who also am an elder", so John might have spoken of himself. Indeed he does so in his second and third Epistles. There is nothing in this objection. There really is no sound reason for not accepting the traditional view of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel.

II

The latest theory of the origin of the Gospels has much in common with what we have just been considering. Like that, it is that they are derived from collections of sayings of our Lord; but they differ in this; that they have been arranged without any thought of chronological order. The collections on which they are supposed to be based were lists of sayings of Jesus with suggestions of circumstances in which they may have been spoken, which were supplied to itinerant evangelists for use in preaching in the course of their journeys. These presumably were provided by the Apostles. Working on these the authors of our Gospels have compiled their books, as I have said, without thought of chronological order. The variety in the accounts of what seem the same events or sayings is easily accounted for by the way they have come into existence. Freely used by different speakers, not anxious about time or place or *ipsissima verba*, variety was inevitable and you have a reasonable explanation of the similarities and dissimilarities. But have you? It may explain the dissimilarities. But such haphazard collection leaves me amazed at the similarities and common sequences.

Does this give us a reasonable account of the origin of our Gospels? Not long ago I read the English translation of a work by Martin Dibelius, one of the leading authorities of this school. It is called *The Message of Jesus*. What have you there? Page after page of sayings of Jesus culled from the Gospels, classified as "Old Sayings", "Mighty Deeds", "Legends" and so on. The lists, or lists similar to them, may have been prepared and put into the hands of itinerant evangelists to be used by them on their missions as occasion offered.

The Oxyrhyncus Fragment I suggest may have been one of them, of which no use was made by any compiler of a Gospel. So our up-to-date scholars, having picked our Gospels to pieces to provide the material, we are asked to believe that the authors of our Gospels sat down before a heterogeneous mass of such lists, sifted out of them a selection of suitable material and each composed his own Gospel. Frankly, I cannot believe any such nonsense. I am willing to admit that in such a way a chapter like Matthew xiii with its seven parables, or Luke xv with its three, might have been composed. But a Gospel as a whole, nay three synoptic Gospels with so much similarity of contents by separate authors, I cannot swallow that. It is like starting to do a jigsaw puzzle without a frame, or a crossword puzzle without clues. You do not wonder at dissimilarities in books composed on such a plan. But how account for the similarities, and that the sequences which are not determined by chronological considerations are yet so similar? It is enough to look at the pages of Dibelius's book in which he lays out the possible material to see the absurdity of the whole thing. You are reminded of the daughters of Pelias induced by Medea to cut up their father on the promise that Medea will put him together and reanimate him. It is a hopeless task. You are reminded of Aaron challenged by Moses for conniving at the idolatry of Israel, and excusing himself, "I bade them bring their gold and ornaments to me and I cast them into the fire, and there came out this calf". Was the calf such an abortion that worship of it was unthinkable? Or was it a thing of beauty? To imagine that our Gospels—works of incomparable literary grace and individuality—are the result of the haphazard efforts of nameless nobodies or a mass of heterogeneous matter is more than my sophisticated mind can swallow. Indeed the hotch-potch of Sholem Ash's *Nazarene* with its fantastic Gospel according to Judas Iscariot seems to me very like what a Gospel composed as form criticism supposes would be—something like an old-fashioned patchwork bedspread.

It is worth while to notice that this idea of the origin of the Gospels is not so new or original as its authors think it is. I remember coming across something very like it when studying for the B.D. about sixty years ago. Professor Stewart, of Glasgow University, one of our examiners, had a theory that the Gospel according to Luke was constructed on a plan some-

thing like this. He tried to divide it into sections dealing with separate subjects, such as The Sabbath, Forgiveness, and so on. It was not very successful and never got any very serious attention. The divisions were so subjective and the titles likewise that anybody could make another classification just as legitimately, and equally unconvincing.

Let us look now at the traditional view. As I have stated, the problem which all the minute and disconnecting analysis of the different Gospels raised, was due to the similarities and diversities among them. How were these to be accounted for? At the long and the last we are told that these Gospels of ours could not have been written just as they are, at first hand by their original authors. They must have worked with and on older documents to which three of them certainly had access. These documents are supposed to have been the following. There must have been a sketch of the life of Christ very like our Gospel according to Mark. Then there must have been a collection of the sayings of Jesus very like our Gospel according to Matthew, but also used by Luke. Then there must have been another collection of the sayings of Jesus, differently arranged and containing a good deal of new matter, and very like our Gospel according to Luke. Then the man who wrote the Gospel according to John must have known these three and added many new things which he had heard on the authority of John.

III

But why this "very like", "very like"? Why not say at once, what all the investigations have practically brought them to, that the men who wrote our Gospels were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and that the writings to which all go back are just the Gospels that for eighteen hundred years have been ascribed to them? Why not say that a great many of the variations in the way of telling the story we cannot give a reason for,—ignorance here is no disgrace—but we can easily imagine reasons. The authors had their own individualities. They were writing clearly for readers in different parts of the then known world. They were writing for people, many of whom had heard the story of Jesus by word of mouth over and over again, and in some cases from actual eye and ear witnesses of what was told. They were writing about the same person and reporting

characteristic sayings and events and specimen days in His life, giving specimen utterances from His lips. All these were in reference to a personality so striking and unique that it was almost impossible for them to avoid reproducing the impression He made with extraordinary sharpness and accuracy and similarity. These things suggest explanations of all the similarity and variety, and it seems easier to explain these in immediate followers of Jesus than in men of a later date who never met Jesus of Nazareth and are dealing only with documents and reports.

But what right have we to think that the tradition speaks truth which ascribes them to the pen of Matthew the publican, Mark the friend of Peter and Barnabas, Luke the friend of Paul, and John the cousin and disciple of Jesus? It is in this way. We have books, copies of the New Testament, more than fifteen hundred years old, which give us the words of the Gospels which we know from contemporary writers were then ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Over two hundred years before that—back, that is to say, to a time not much greater than that which separates us from the '45.—we have books that tell us explicitly that the four Gospels, which we can recognise as our four, were then in existence and were believed by everybody to be written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These men, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, do not all belong to one place. Irenaeus was familiar by personal travel and residence with the life and thought and practice of both Asia Minor and the South of France. Clement in the same way knew the opinions of Egypt. Tertullian similarly could speak for the rest of the north of Africa. That is to say we have evidence of what was thought about the authorship of the Gospels within one hundred and ten years of the time at which the earliest of them may have been written. Nobody had any doubt about it. A heretic of that day wrote a commentary on one of them. Go nearer them still, to the days of Tatian, Justin Martyr, and Papias, that is to say, to within fifty years of the time when John was still alive, and what do we find? We find express testimony that Matthew wrote the oracles of the Lord in Hebrew, that Mark wrote a report of what he heard Peter say about the Lord. We find Tatian writing an elaborate harmony of the four Gospels, fitting them into one another, and what fragments of his work have come down show clearly that his four were our four. Justin Martyr tells us that the four

Gospels, which can be identified as our four Gospels, were read in public worship in the churches in his day with the same reverence and respect as were the books of the Old Testament. Consider what all that means! These things are not mentioned as curiosities or novelties. They are reported as what was familiar and ordinary. Within fifty years of the time of the death of John the son of Zebedee, our Gospels were familiarly known and generally read in public worship. That is not a thing that comes into existence in a day. When that has become a well-established and general custom it means that there is a history behind it, and if you allow for that, as you must do to be fair, you are carried back to the life-time of men who could check the accuracy of statements made in the Gospels and who could challenge current statements as to their authorship, if they were not true. These four Gospels are not the only writings which purported to give an account of the life of Jesus Christ. There were others—the Apocryphal Gospels—which partially survive; others of which we only know the names; others still which are only known by vague reference to their discarding. But these four stand out by the beginning of the second century as selected by the Church by a process of natural selection and survival of the fittest, as the reliable witnesses to the origin and Founder of Christianity. That is the testimony of history. It guarantees the trustworthiness, and that as the result of a sifting process, of our four Gospels.

But there is more than that. I am satisfied that the conviction is justified that their traditional authors are their actual authors. Take me back to within the life-time of the younger contemporaries of the reputed authors, as our inquiry has done; show me works in circulation bearing their names; let me hear not a whisper against this view; and then ask me to ignore all that and to believe that, eighteen hundred years afterwards, you have found out that they did not write these books, but that others wrote them from books very like them, originals which now have perished, but which may probably have been written by the men to whom I ascribe them—ask me to believe that, I say, and you ask too much. I am content to believe that these are themselves the originals.

And all the more so for these reasons. While you have been discussing the differences and similarities in the four sides of the frame of the picture, others have been studying the wood,

the carving, and the gilt, and all alike take me back to times where I cannot believe that others dared palm off forgeries on Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; to times where mistakes as to the authors could not have had time or opportunity to strike root and bloom without contradiction from the men who knew. Along the line of the study of the language used, as exhibited in the surviving literature of the day, and of the evidence of archaeology wrought in monument and civic documents that have survived, quoted by authorities like Blass and Ramsay and Weissmann, we find these writings reliable wherever they can be thus tested, and why not reliable all through? Having reached this, these Gospels witness to one another. Here is John, the last of them, for instance, evidently acquainted with all the other three. He has no hesitation in repeating some and leaving out more of what they contain, just as it served his immediate purpose, which he definitely states. Why worry further then, as to the motives of Matthew and Luke? Luke has been vindicated by Ramsay, that painstaking student and investigator of the records in paper and stone of those days, as a reliable historian in his "Acts of the Apostles". Why treat him as possibly a romancer in his Gospel? He tells us deliberately that he had many a written document to go by when he started to write his Gospel, and that his anxiety was to investigate and mark out the proper order. Why forbid us to think that Mark and Matthew were among his texts? Matthew, we are told, preserved the oracles of Christ in Hebrew. No Aramaic or Hebrew text of Matthew survives. But why may not this Greek Matthew which we have, which has too a peculiarly Hebrew savour about it, why may it not be a Greek version of that Hebrew record made by Matthew himself, the custom-house clerk, who would only be fit for his original job if he could speak and write more languages than one in his home of Galilee of the Gentiles, where Greek was as common as his native tongue? Why ask us to think that though Mark may have written the original, our actual Gospel has been worked up from that by someone else? It is not necessary. It helps nothing. It is more probable that we have the original here. So now we have got behind the Gospels to the men. The question is not simply can we trust what we find in the books, be the writers who they may, but are these men capable of inventing such a glorious story as the four-fold record holds?

IV

For myself I don't care who were the individuals who wrote the Gospels. They bear the stamp of truth upon them. The great mass of their contents is palpably the product of the earliest days of the Church's life and sprang into existence on Palestinian soil. Consider how much that means. It means that they must have been written and have taken shape within forty years of the death of Christ. Why do I say so? Because though cradled in Palestine in forty years from its origin, with the fall of Jerusalem, Christianity had shifted its centre from Palestine to the Greek speaking world. Its earliest literature is Greek. Its only surviving Gospels are written in Greek. But while elsewhere in its literature the Greek is native, in the Gospels while the words are the words of Greece, the style is the style of Palestine. In less than fifty years from the origin of Christianity it had become practically impossible to write the first three Gospels anywhere within its borders. The fourth Gospel is the best proof of this, so different in form and style. The pith of the Synoptic Gospels comes straight from Palestine, Palestine in the time of the men who knew Jesus of Nazareth, and who wrote and spoke when every word they uttered, every line they penned, was liable to challenge and contradiction if it was not true. What these Gospels contain is sifted truth, straight from Palestine, straight from Christ.

If that be so, why hesitate to accept the tradition that they were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Do you know any others of the early Christians better qualified to do so? Better qualified naturally to write this wonderful story, which we have seen comes from Palestine, the Palestine of Christ's day, full of a life that moves on a higher plane than this of earth, that embodies thoughts too deep for words, that speaks in terms that are spirit and life. These simple men could not invent it, not one of them, far less four.

Synoptic Problem! When one thinks of the labour, time and scholarship that for a hundred years have been given to this subject, one is sometimes tempted to ask *cui bono?* What is it all about? A mole hill has been magnified into a mountain and then elaborate works constructed to remove it! Surely the supreme fact which is apt to be forgotten in all this quest for the relations of Matthew, Mark, and Luke's accounts of things

is that at the back of all is not a document or set of documents, but a Life, a Person, who spake as never man spake, who went about continually doing good and in three short years turned the world upside down. When that is recalled, how trivial all the scrutiny of phrase and possible documents becomes, how infinitely more reasonable the old traditional view appears than any of the pretenders to a sounder position. And in any case Principal Shairp's great lyric holds the field.

" I have a life *with* Christ to live,
 But ere I live it, must I wait
 Till learning can clear answer give
 Of this or that book's date ?

" I have a life *in* Christ to live,
 I have a death in Christ to die;
 And must I wait, till science give
 All doubts a full reply?

" Nay rather while the sea of doubt
 Is raging wildly round about,
 Questioning of life and death and sin,
 Let me but creep within
 Thy fold, O Christ, and at thy feet
 Take but the lowest seat,
 And hear Thine awful voice repeat
 In gentlest accents, heavenly sweet,
 Come unto me, and rest;
 Believe me and be blest."

ROBERT J. DRUMMOND.

Edinburgh.