

The Origin and Relation of the Four Gospels.

BY THE REV. J. J. HALCOMBE, M.A., CAMBRIDGE.

THE first condition of all original investigation is that the student shall approach his subject with his mind wholly unbiassed by any assumptions. No matter how apparently true, nor how long and universally accepted his previously conceived opinions may be, they must all be placed, so to speak, in the dock, and tried on the capital charge of misdirection.

But when, having once arrived at his own conclusions, the student desires to expound them to others, he can hardly do otherwise than reverse the process by which he has himself proceeded. Instead of working from evidence to conclusions, he must state his conclusions, show how they combine into a harmonious whole, and finally show how the evidence supports them.

Apart from such a process as this, it may well happen that even the most perfect series of scientific inductions, especially when opposed to more or less universally accepted opinions, may appear hopelessly disconnected and incredible.

Acting on this principle, I shall endeavour in the present paper to state the general drift of the conclusions to which many years' study has led me, and to show how these conclusions combine to form a history of gospel production, which is not only eminently simple and natural; but in the case of two of the writers, St. John and St. Luke, strictly consistent with their own avowed object in writing.

If here and there I am obliged to give reasons for this or that conclusion, it will be understood that I do not advance them by way of evidence, but merely to try and bring out the inherent probabilities of the case.

Manifestly the first thing we require to do is to ascertain what the facts to be dealt with are, or, in other words, what each of the Evangelists has done. Provided we are content to assume that what a writer has done must necessarily represent what he intended to do, this initial inquiry ought of itself to go a long way towards solving any difficulties which may confront us.

Supposing we were approaching the critical study of the Gospels for the first time, and were *wholly unbiassed by any preconceived ideas as to their order of publication*, we could hardly fail to be struck with certain simple and obvious facts.

We should observe—

(1) That the Apostolic Evangelists, St. John and St. Matthew, deal more exclusively than their co-historians with the oral teaching of our Lord, and generally with the more intrinsically important and personal aspects of His ministry.

(2) That their histories, never to any appreciable extent, repeat each other; and

(3) That taken together, their histories represent an exquisitely balanced twofold primary representation of our Lord's personal ministry and teaching—the one representation dealing with the personal and spiritual, the other with the personal and historical aspect of the subject.

So far we should be bound to assume either (*a*) that the two Gospels were practically written at the same time and represented a carefully sustained division of the subject between the two writers, or (*b*) that whichever might have been the second of the two writers, that writer had intentionally supplemented the work of the first.

With regard to the Gospels not written by Apostles or eye-witnesses, we should observe—

(1) That St. Mark's Gospel is so intimately connected with that of St. Matthew as to suggest some special motive or motives for his travelling so closely over the same ground; and

(2) That the different sequence in which St. Mark arranges many of the incidents recorded by St. Matthew, and the extent to which he uniformly adds many circumstantial details of such incidents, naturally suggest that his motive for writing was to do just what in these respects he has done.

With regard to St. Luke, we should further observe—

(1) That, according to what is generally allowed to be the most natural meaning of the expression which he uses, he himself in his Preface tells us that he intended to write in chronological order.

(2) That with one notable and explainable exception (*see below*) his order agrees with, and therefore confirms, St. Mark's rather than St. Matthew's order; and

(3) That he adds much which gives a greater completeness to the general history, and which systematically fills in the historical lacunæ created

by the peculiar manner in which the other records are composed.

Again, therefore, we should think it probable that St. Luke's, like St. Mark's, motive for writing was to do precisely that which our preliminary investigation shows that he has done.

Such I submit is the general impression as to the relation of the Gospels, which a first study of them would make upon the mind of any student who was wholly unbiassed by any preconceived and possibly misleading ideas on the subject.

Supposing this impression to be a correct one, it must necessarily serve to make the following facts stand out in bold relief:—

(1) The two Gospels by Apostles are both seen to be independent documents, *i.e.* without any such repetition as would detract from the originality of whichever was the later written.

(2) The close, and especially the verbal connection between the Gospels of St. Mark and St. Luke on the one hand, and St. Matthew on the other, does, as a matter of indisputable fact, serve to graft the non-Apostolic text of St. Mark and St. Luke upon the Apostolic text of St. Matthew, and so imparts to the former an Apostolic authority.

To gain this authority clearly may have been the motive for St. Mark and St. Luke writing as they did.

(3) Supposing that St. John wrote before St. Matthew, and that the latter was followed by St. Mark and St. Luke, *each successive portion of the fourfold record must, at the date of its publication, have presented the history in a form complete as far as it went.*

Thus St. John, inasmuch as he explains the manifest historical incompleteness of his narrative, thereby constitutes his Gospel the one record which, without creating any false impression by its omissions, was *suited to have stood alone as a first Gospel.*

We thus get the following results with regard to the four documents:—

(1) St. Matthew's record, when read with St. John's, completes a primary representation of the more personal aspect of our Lord's ministry and teaching.

(2) St. Mark's narrative explains and supplements St. Matthew's history.

(3) St. Luke's Gospel gives a final completeness to the whole record, and notably in the matter of historical sequence explains much which, in the case of extra-Judæan readers especially, must clearly have needed explanation.

I will now deal with each of the Gospels separately, taking them in the order which the above general survey suggests.

(To be continued.)

Newman Smyth's "Christian Ethics."¹

BY PROFESSOR VERNON BARTLET, M.A., OXFORD.

THE "International Theological Library" aims at a high ideal, both as to competence and as to spirit; and hitherto, at least, it has fallen but little, if at all, short of its aim. If Dr. Driver's *Introduction* is full of the best qualities of scientific research, and if Dr. Bruce's *Apologetics* tells of largeness of spirit and profound Christian insight, no less may be claimed for Dr. Smyth's *Christian Ethics*, the first real contribution to this vitally important branch of theology made by an Anglo-Saxon theologian. Its prominent features are thoroughness, balance, freshness; and, underlying

all, a deep enthusiasm which makes the book eminently readable and stimulating. Sanity and wholesomeness are in every line, and the whole book lives.

It is, however, obvious that certain aspects of a book so comprehensive are more fitted than others for notice in these pages. Accordingly, after indicating the general line of treatment, we will try to emphasise those parts which throw light on biblical truth and on the Christian life of to-day.

Admirable, indeed, both in its sympathy and firmness, is the philosophical Introduction, dealing with the relations of Christian Ethics to Ethics in general, to Religion, and to Theology. Its tone is well represented in the dictum, quoted from Martineau, that "conscience may act as human

¹ The International Theology Library, vol. ii. *Christian Ethics*, by Newman Smyth, D.D., Author of *Old Faiths in New Light*, etc. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 1892. Pp. x, 498, 8vo; price 10s. 6d.