

Problems in the Gospels.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. C. A. BRIGGS, D.D., LITT.D., UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, NEW YORK.

DURING recent years I have been called upon to lecture repeatedly upon the life of Jesus and the teachings of Jesus. After many years of special work upon the Old Testament I returned to my early studies in the New Testament with renewed zeal. The rigorous methods of criticism which I had been accustomed to use for many years in the study of the Old Testament, I could not withhold from the New Testament also. As I approached the New Testament from the Hebrew and Aramaic side, many things appeared to me in a different light from that in which they are usually understood. Many new problems emerged, and old ones have found new solutions. I propose to give three papers on these problems in successive numbers to the readers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, and to follow them up as soon as practicable in the new year by a volume giving a discussion of many more.

I.

When did Jesus begin His Ministry?

One of the most difficult questions connected with the early ministry of Jesus is: when Jesus began His ministry. The four Gospels differ in their statements. According to the Gospel of Mark *'after that John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe in the gospel'* (1¹⁴⁻¹⁵). It is a sure result of the modern criticism of the Gospels, that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, but with freedom, usually condensing, but sometimes enlarging and explaining. In Matthew we find: *'Now when he heard that John was delivered up, he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the borders of Zebulun and Naphtali: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah. . . . From that time began Jesus to preach, and to say, Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'* (4¹²⁻¹⁷). It is evident that vv.¹³⁻¹⁶ are an addition to the source. The other verses give essentially the same as Mark, but with important modifications, which we shall consider later on. Luke tells us: *'And Jesus*

returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and a fame went out concerning him through all the region round about. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all' (4¹⁴⁻¹⁵). It is evident that vv.^{14b-15} are an addition to the source, and that the phrase *'in the power of the Spirit'* is characteristically Lukan and original with this Gospel. There remains therefore, as derived from the Markan source, only *'and Jesus returned into Galilee'*; the reference to the arrest of John the Baptist being omitted altogether. Luke is commonly recognized to be the best historian in the New Testament, the writer from whom we would expect historical data more than from any other. It is contrary to this characteristic that he should omit such a definite statement as that given in Mark with reference to John the Baptist, if he regarded it as a correct historical statement. We are compelled to suppose, therefore, that he did not think the ministry of Jesus in Galilee began subsequent to the arrest of John the Baptist. In this he is sustained by the Gospel of John (2-3), which gives a ministry of Jesus in Galilee and Judæa prior to the arrest of John, and gives another motive for departing into Galilee a second time. This is the statement: *'When therefore the Lord knew how that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, . . . he left Judæa, and departed again into Galilee'* (4¹⁻³).

On the surface of the statements of the Gospels there are grave discrepancies in which Mark and Matthew, on the one side, seem to date the beginning of the Galilean ministry subsequent to the arrest of the Baptist, while Luke and John do not; the latter asserting a ministry in Galilee prior to that event. Those harmonists who regard the Gospel of John as unhistorical, build on the statement of Mark and make the Galilean ministry begin in fact after the arrest of the Baptist, without giving the silence of Luke its due value. Those who accept the historicity of the Gospel of John, endeavour to arrange an earlier Galilean ministry, so far as the statements of that Gospel are concerned; but put all the Synoptic material subsequent to the arrest of the Baptist. This does

not, however, escape the difficulty, but only makes the discrepancy more glaring. If we build on the statement of Luke, there is no reason why we should not put a considerable amount of the Synoptic material before the arrest of the Baptist. If the statement of Mark is invalid as to the ministry reported by the Gospel of John, it is no less invalid as to the Galilean ministry of Luke's report, and should be no barrier to the consideration of any evidence that may lead to a larger Galilean ministry before the arrest of the Baptist, even to the inclusion of a considerable amount of material given by Mark himself subsequent to his statement. It has been a serious mistake to make this statement of Mark the key to the early ministry of our Lord. It is impossible to make any satisfactory harmony of the Gospels on that basis. It is much safer to build on the statement of Luke.

There are three possible explanations of the relation of Luke's statement to that of Mark. The statement of Mark was before Luke in its present form, and he either (1) rejected it as unhistorical, or (2) interpreted it as not referring to the real beginning of the Galilean ministry. (3) The statement of Mark in its present form is not that of the original Mark which Luke used, but the reference to the Baptist is one of the additions made to the primitive Gospel. We shall consider these in the inverse order.

It is recognized by all critics that the Greek canonical Mark has some material which was not in the original Mark at the basis of the Gospels. How much this material may be, and what in particular may be regarded as additional, depends upon careful criticism. Certainly there is no evidence that Luke had this statement as to John the Baptist before him, or that the author of the Gospel of John knew of it. Did Matthew's Gospel build on the present text of Mark? This is possible, but by no means certain. It is difficult to see why Matthew should change the statement of the fact in Mark to the *hearing* about it. The structure of the sentence is quite different in Matthew from Mark, although, apart from the addition of *hearing*, both might be regarded as translations of a common Hebrew original. It is altogether probable that '*the gospel of God*' and '*and believe in the gospel*' of Mark are additions to the original Mark. They are not in Matthew. The original Gospel gave only '*preaching and saying, The kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye.*'

Resch thinks that the previous clause, '*the time is fulfilled,*' was there also. That is quite possible. In any case, the Greek Mark has at least two clauses of additions to the original Hebrew Gospel, and if so in vv.^{14b-15}, why not also in the reference to John's arrest in v.^{14a}? The most that can be said therefore is that it is not certain whether the clause, '*after that John was delivered up,*' was in the original Mark or not.

If it were in the original Mark, was it designed to state the actual beginning of the Galilean ministry, and if so, was it so understood by Luke? The statement is in the protasis of a temporal clause, whose apodosis is a general statement as to the substance of the preaching of Jesus in Galilee, namely, the proclamation of the advent of the kingdom of God and the call to repentance, which was also essentially the message of the Baptist. This is as much as to say that after the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus went into Galilee to preach the same message that the Baptist had preached. It does not necessarily imply that Jesus did not teach or work miracles before the arrest of John, unless we suppose that this was designed as a comprehensive statement of His entire work. But that opinion cannot be sustained. The statement might be interpreted as a general introductory statement with reference to His ministry in Galilee as a whole, without the necessary implication that all the events mentioned subsequently, even in Mark, actually followed the arrest of the Baptist; unless we insist upon strict chronological order for all the material of this Gospel. But the modern view, that the order of Mark is the norm for the life of Jesus, has been so shattered by recent criticism, that it can no longer be regarded as a decisive test in any question. In fact, none of the Gospels can be relied upon for chronological order. They are all dominated by didactic considerations, which make the topical order prevail over the chronological. The ambiguity of the sentence in Mark involving the possibility that it might be interpreted as making the ministry of Jesus in Galilee begin with the arrest of the Baptist, would be a sufficient motive for Luke to omit it.

Matthew's statement is: '*From that time* (defined not only by the arrest of the Baptist and Jesus' withdrawal to Galilee, but also by the leaving Nazareth to dwell in Capernaum) *began Jesus to preach, and to say, Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*' This represents that

there was a real beginning, not simply with the arrest of the Baptist, but in connexion with this removal to Capernaum after the arrest of the Baptist. If we could distinguish between the ministry of preaching the kingdom and an earlier ministry of teaching and miracle-working, then this would be a second stage in the Galilean ministry of Jesus, which would by no means exclude an earlier ministry of a simpler kind. There are reasons for regarding this distinction as in a measure correct, although it is not clear in fact to any of the evangelists. Prior to the death of the Baptist, Jesus in fact was in his shadow. The Baptist was in the public eye the principal; Jesus appeared rather as his most prominent disciple. It might well be, therefore, that Mark, and even his authority Peter, conceived of the earlier ministry of Jesus as introductory and relatively unimportant, and that His own real independent ministry began after the death of the Baptist. At all events, there is a dilemma, so far as I can see, for those who regard the statements of John 2-3 as historical. They must either give these statements of Mark some such explanation as those suggested above, or else regard the reference to the arrest of John in this connexion as unhistorical. I would not shrink from this alternative, if the other could not be sustained.

It is noteworthy that Tatian, the earliest harmonist of the Gospels, does not hesitate to ignore this statement of Mark. This fact had escaped my attention until after I had made up my mind on the subject. I was gratified to be sustained by so early and so great an authority.

The story of Luke is intrinsically most probable. The baptism by the Divine Spirit was immediately followed by an ecstatic condition of fasting in the wilderness, at the conclusion of which Jesus endures the great temptation. Returning from the wilderness, He goes under the power of the Spirit to undertake His ministry in Galilee.

The statements of the Gospel of John are entirely harmonious with this. It was natural that on His way to Galilee He should stop at the Jordan side to revisit the one who had baptized Him and given Him the anointing for His ministry.

The recognition of His Messiahship by the Baptist, and the transfer of two of his disciples, Andrew and probably John, to Jesus, and the call of Philip the next day, are altogether in place.

With these three disciples He attends a marriage feast at Cana of Galilee on the third day afterwards, and then goes down to Capernaum (1²⁹-2¹²). The naming of Peter (1⁴¹⁻⁴²) and the call of Nathanael (1⁴⁵⁻⁵¹) were evidently inserted for topical reasons. They belong to a much later date, as I have shown elsewhere.

We have now to consider the material of the Galilean ministry given by the Synoptists subsequent to the statements considered above. So far as Luke is concerned, there is no reason why all of this should be subsequent to the arrest of the Baptist. We have seen that the statements of Mark and Matthew should not compel us to that opinion. Luke gives first of all in the Galilean ministry Jesus' rejection at Nazareth (4¹⁶⁻³⁰). But this is only a variation of the story of His rejection given in Mt 13⁵⁴⁻⁵⁸, Mk 6^{1-6a}, at a much later date. Jesus could not have challenged His townsmen to accept Him as Messiah so early in His ministry. Luke placed this rejection at Nazareth at the beginning of the Galilean ministry for topical reasons. We should not hesitate to place it later, as do Mark and Matthew.

The call of the four fishermen comes first in Mark (Mk 1¹⁶⁻²⁰, Mt 4¹⁸⁻²², Lk 5¹⁻¹¹), and it fits on appropriately to the calls mentioned in John. This is followed by the Sabbath day in Capernaum (Mk 1²¹⁻³⁴, Mt 8¹⁴⁻¹⁷, Lk 4³¹⁻⁴¹), and a tour of teaching and miracle-working in Galilee (Mk 1³⁵⁻⁴⁵, Mt 4²³ 8¹⁻⁴, Lk 4^{42-5¹⁰}). The Synoptists differ slightly in the order of these events. But all give them at this time. Then comes a second Sabbath in Capernaum (Mk 2¹⁻¹², Mt 9¹⁻⁸, Lk 5¹⁷⁻²⁶). This is followed by the call of Matthew, making the sixth disciple (Mk 2¹³⁻¹⁷, Mt 9⁹⁻¹³, Lk 5²⁷⁻³²). All this material seems to belong to the earlier Galilean ministry, before the arrest of the Baptist. The next item in the Synoptists (Mk 2¹⁸⁻²², Mt 9¹⁴⁻¹⁷, Lk 5³³⁻³⁹) is of some importance, because it is related in some way to Jn 3²²⁻³⁰. The words of Jesus addressed to the disciples of the Baptist with reference to fasting are: '*Can the sons of the bride-chamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then will they fast in that day*' (Mk 2¹⁹⁻²⁰). These words seem to imply Jn 3²⁹⁻³⁰: '*He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which*

standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.'

Jesus justifies Himself and His disciples over against the disciples of the Baptist by using the very figure of speech with reference to Himself that the Baptist had used. The discussion between the disciples of Jesus and the disciples of the Baptist about fasting implies the same essential situation as the discussion about purifying. Both imply that Jesus was followed by disciples. The disciples of Jn 3²² can hardly be explained, unless we suppose that at least several had been previously called. It seems altogether probable, therefore, that Jesus soon after the call of Matthew departed from Galilee to Judæa, and came into connexion with the Baptist again according to Jn 3²²⁻³⁶, and that in the same region the discussion about fasting took place, as well as that about purification.

The next incident given by Mark (2²³⁻²⁸) and by Luke (6¹⁻⁵), although given by Matthew at a later date (12¹⁻⁸), is doubtless in its place in Mark. It gives additional evidence of great importance. The disciples on a Sabbath day, passing through the fields of ripe grain, pluck some of the ears and rub out the grains and eat them. The ripe grain was still uncut. Leviticus (23⁵⁻¹⁵) gives the law that the first-fruits of the barley harvest must be presented as an Omer offering on the morrow after the first great Sabbath, that is, on the second day of unleavened bread. Prior to this it was unlawful to cut the grain or to eat of it. *'And ye shall eat neither bread nor parched corn, nor fresh ears, until this self-same day'* (Lv 23¹⁴). The disciples of Jesus would certainly obey this law, however far they may have been from the Pharisaic excesses in holding that rubbing grain in the hands was labour, and so a violation of the Sabbath. The wheat harvest was two or three weeks later. We must therefore conclude that this incident was subsequent to the Passover, and not distant from it. In the text of Luke, ἐν σαββάτῳ is followed in most early codices (as A C D E H K, etc.) by δευτεροπρώτῳ, and this is accepted by Tischendorf and most critical authorities, although rejected by Westcott and Hort and Weiss, who follow too closely B 8, and by others. It is a difficult read-

ing, whose omission is easier to explain than its insertion. Whether it was original or a later explanatory addition, it is still important because it defines that Sabbath. It seems to be the Sabbath after the Omer offering, and therefore Jesus and His disciples were on their way from Jerusalem to Galilee, having just left Jerusalem immediately after the conclusion of Passover. If this be so, then all the events thus far considered except the last, were prior to the first Passover which Jesus spent with His disciples in Jerusalem. This second return to Galilee would then correspond with that mentioned in John (4¹⁻³), the motive of which was the opposition of the Pharisees of Judæa, due to the wonderful success of Jesus in winning disciples even beyond that of the Baptist. Jesus, for prudential reasons, would avoid a premature conflict with the Pharisees of Jerusalem. There is no sufficient reason to doubt this statement, although it is prefixed to the story of the journey through Samaria, which must be assigned to a much later time in the life of Jesus.

The Gospel of John does not mention the arrest of the Baptist at this stage, and it is probable that it had not yet happened when Jesus departed for Galilee, but that it occurred so soon afterwards that it might be assigned by Matthew and Mark as a motive for the beginning of the preaching of repentance and the near advent of the kingdom of God.

If now we look back over the incidents thus far considered as prior to this, the first Passover of Jesus' ministry, we may conclude that the first meeting of Jesus with the Baptist was due to His journey from Galilee to Jerusalem to keep the Feast of Tabernacles, and that it was on His return from this feast that He went alone to the Baptist to be baptized by him in the Jordan. The first stage of the ministry of Jesus, therefore, was between Tabernacles and Passover, and this first Passover spent by Jesus and His disciples in Jerusalem marks essentially the boundary between the preparatory work of the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus. The work of Jesus up to this time was a preparatory work under the shadow of the Baptist, and therefore not considered by Mark and his authority Peter as the real beginning of the ministry of Jesus.