

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

THE  
CHURCHMAN

---

APRIL, 1893.

---

ART I.—ON THE “FORMATION OF THE GOSPELS” IN  
CONNECTION WITH SOME RECENT THEORIES.

AMONG the innumerable attempts which have been made from the earliest period of Christianity to trace the sources and mark the stages of the formation of the Gospel narratives, it may be safely affirmed that none has passed beyond the line of mere plausible conjecture, and few indeed beyond that of ingenious speculation. Every effort of the kind is at once confronted by the insurmountable fact of a unanimous reception of them by the Christian Church as representing the testimonies of four independent writers, whose individuality is marked both in the variety of the facts and the distinctions of style which are obvious to the most ordinary reader. Even those discrepancies in the narratives that are incapable of solution by the consideration of the different points of view in which the facts they contain presented themselves to the eye of the narrator, are invaluable (as St. Chrysostom observes) as proofs that there was no collusion between the writers; that they had not combined together to produce a history which should be so consistent in all its minutest features as to enable their adversaries to reject it on the very ground of its artificial accuracy.<sup>1</sup> Whatever may be the results of the process of disintegration which is being carried on in the books of the Old Testament, which confessedly belong to various ages, and in the earliest period are necessarily composite, there can be no ground for applying the same kind of anatomical dissection to contemporary documents which belong to a historic age, and were by that age received with unanimity as the genuine productions of the authors whose names they bear. To those who plead against them the obscurity of their origin and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Chrysost. in Matt., Hom. i.

difficulty of fixing their date or establishing their authorship, we may reasonably oppose the fact of their unanimous reception, and the instinct which led the universal Church—not its mere rulers and councils, but the *ecclesia dispersa*—to separate the authentic narratives from the numerous fictions and forgeries which ever accompany truth in order to hinder or disturb its reception. The origin of the greatest works, and of those especially which have had the most sudden and universal influence, has ever been clouded with great obscurity. It would seem as though the sources of Divine truth in regard to its promulgation were hidden from us even as the early life of Christ was hidden; lest we should rest our faith more on the subordinate parts of the narrative than on that great work of redemption which was the supreme object of it. The burial-place of Moses was said to have been hidden for a similar cause; and when some Maronite shepherds in the seventeenth century claimed to have discovered it in a wild rocky fissure in the Lebanon, and with great labour succeeded in opening it, they found it empty and without a single trace of any occupant.<sup>1</sup> It may well be anticipated that the labours of the new critics of our Gospels will end as fruitlessly. For when we look back upon the grand design of Christianity and the methods which were adopted for its first promulgation, we shall see a good reason for the obscurity which has been suffered to rest upon its earliest-recorded history. A religion of the heart and life and motives was not—like the letter of the law, or the revelations of the Koran—embodied in a written form until the necessity arose for it in the death of its first teachers. Up to that period Christianity was a *preached* and not a *written* faith. "Christ," observes Bishop Wessenberg, "incorporated His spiritual teaching in no written form. He put it forth that it might be proclaimed by the Holy Ghost through earthly organs to all nations in their several tongues."<sup>2</sup> The first assemblies of Christians had only the ancient Scriptures and the traditions of their Lord's fulfilment of them to guide their lives and to supply the means of their worship. They looked for the immediate return of the Saviour, and enjoyed in the meantime the preaching of the Apostles and their disciples while they were present with them, and their epistles when they were absent. Credner has justly observed:

"For the perfect written publication of this evangelical tradition, living as it did in the mouth and heart of the Chris-

<sup>1</sup> Vide Jäger, "Hist. Ecol.," tom. ii., p. 112 (Hamb., 1717).

<sup>2</sup> "Die grossen Kirchenversammlungen, des 15 und 16 Jahrhunderts," tom. i., p. 62.

tian, there could be no ground whatever in the beginning. The necessity for authentic writings of this kind remained long unrecognised, for the Christians expected no new religious writings from the Messiah, Who came only to fulfil the law and the prophets. In the Jewish schools the scholars were accustomed to preserve by memory the long instructions of their teachers, and the universal and joyful expectation of the near return of the Lord made a written Gospel superfluous. From this it must not seem wonderful that during the period which preceded the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) no proof of the existence of an authentic written account of the evangelical history is to be found. Only the private interest of individuals and the effort after a more perfect knowledge gave occasion to fragmentary records of the evangelical history."<sup>1</sup>

This last observation suggests to us a consideration of great importance in its bearing on our synoptical Gospels. Between the mere traditional teaching of the Gospel in the preaching and letters of the Apostles, and the systematic and orderly record of them in the four Evangelists, an important period is interposed, during which the words of the preacher and his testimony to the life of Christ became the subject of privately recorded memorials, to the existence of which the opening passages of St. Luke's Gospel gives us a clear testimony. This is strongly confirmed by the tradition of the origin of St. Mark's Gospel, than which none was more constantly or universally received in the Church. St. Mark (we are told), being with St. Peter at Rome, took down in writing the main points of his teaching. We read further that, though St. Peter (perhaps for the reasons already indicated) did not approve of this new method of propagating his teaching, he at last assented to it, and to this, it is said, we owe the present Gospel of St. Mark. Now, it is a curious fact that Papias describes a Gospel by St. Mark which in no respect can be reconciled with that we actually possess. For it is described as not having any systematic or orderly form, which our Gospel possesses in a very remarkable degree. May we not, then, reasonably conclude that the Gospel mentioned by Papias was the original form in which the Petrine narrative was recorded, while that which we possess is the reduction of it to a systematic narrative? In this view the two first synoptical Gospels may be regarded as the records of the teaching of the Apostles whose names they bear, while St. Luke's, according to its prefatory words, is an original effort to reproduce in the strictest order the incidents of the life of Christ, falling back (as a later

---

<sup>1</sup> Credner, "Einleitung in das N. T." (Halle, 1836), p. 193.

biographer would naturally do) upon those earliest events in the history of the Holy Family with which the previous authorities he indicates would doubtless have furnished him.

The transition period between the traditional and the written Gospel—speaking chronologically, between the ascension of our Lord and the destruction of Jerusalem—was naturally one of the greatest obscurity. The preachers of the Gospel were scattered, and its work carried on orally or by letters to the principal Churches. But as the living witnesses passed away from year to year, the necessity for a written record became more and more urgent. The return of Christ had become identified in the minds of his disciples with the destruction of the fated city, and not only the intermixture of both events in His final prophecy of them, but many other passages of His teaching, led them to this conclusion. The announcement to the Apostles (Matt. x. 23), the misunderstood words relating to St. John (John xxi. 22), the prophecy, "this generation shall not pass away," etc. (Matt. xxiv. 34)—everything pointed towards the same end. The anxiety of the Church at the close of what we may term the preaching age—the age of fresh and living memories of so momentous a past—is well represented by the words with which Papias, one of the most important links between the two periods, describes his own feelings: "I did not seek for the society of those who spoke much, as most do, but for those who taught true things; nor of those who remembered the teachings of others, but of those who taught the things enjoined to their faith by the Lord."

The notes and memorials of that Divine instruction which hitherto had had only a private and personal character now took a more definite and historical form. "Memory," as Credner observes, "needed arrangement and regular methods and points of connection. One had, in the connected narrative, to put together what was done in Galilee; what during the last journey to the feast; what, again, at Jerusalem. Thus the Gospel tradition obtained a form which can be none other than that which is presented in the synoptical Gospels."<sup>1</sup>

The first two Gospels, according to this simple and natural view, sprang out of the reduction of the *λόγια*, or memoirs, of their writers; the second representing the preaching of St. Peter, while the first has distinctive tokens of having been written in the spirit and for the benefit of the Jewish Christians in Palestine, which explains the ancient and generally received tradition that it was originally written in Hebrew. On the other hand, the Gospel of St. Mark justifies, both in its style and character, the equally primitive belief that it was written

---

<sup>1</sup> Credner, pp. 197, 198.

in Rome, and represents the preaching of St. Peter during his abode in that city.

The Gospel of St. Luke assumes a character altogether different from both, and professes to be compiled after a perfect knowledge, not only of the facts as declared by the eye-witnesses, but also of the records of them which had already appeared in many different forms. The Evangelist fulfils in this respect the description which Papias gives of himself, as a diligent student and inquirer, relying on the actual knowledge and experience of those who had preceded him. It would seem to have been his design to give a clear and chronological narrative by reducing into a regular order the *λόγια* which represented the teaching of Christ in a more occasional and irregular form, and also to correct any inaccuracies that might have occurred in former compilers. These being the manifest and professed objects of the synoptical Gospels, we might reasonably expect to find in them a clear individuality and evident tokens of a distinct personality. And in this expectation we are not disappointed. From many distinctive characteristics, for which the reader might be referred to the exhaustive treatise of Credner, the Gospel of St. Matthew represents the teaching of a native of Palestine directed to the Jewish nation specially. No less clearly indicative of its origin and design is the Gospel of St. Mark, which verifies in a singular manner the tradition of the earliest Christian writers. The description of the customs of the Pharisees (Mark vii. 3, 4) is a sufficient proof that his Gospel was written for Gentile Christians, and in a place where the Jewish law was very little known. But still more significant is the insertion of the words "of all nations" (Mark xi. 17), while St. Matthew and St. Luke merely write, "My house shall be called the house of prayer," leaving out the claim of the Gentiles to have a portion in it. The constant use of Latin forms and titles, as census, centurion, quadrans, grabbatus, legion, prætorium, etc., is so distinctive a characteristic of St. Mark's Gospel as to have led to the early tradition that it was actually written in Latin. The characteristic features both in style and diction of St. Luke's Gospel have been described by Credner so fully (pp. 131, 142) as to need only the reference to so exhaustive an argument. From all these considerations it must appear to every impartial inquirer that the strong individuality of the writers of the synoptical Gospels gives the most convincing refutation to those modern theories which represent them as deriving their narratives from the common source of an *Urevangelium*, or as having been pieced together out of Petrine or other original documents—a view which has been lately put forth with elaborate ingenuity by Mr. Badham in

his treatise on the "The Formation of the Gospels." Our greatest security in accepting them lies in the originality and independence of their testimony. This is St. Chrysostom's contention, who points out the inevitable danger of their rejection had there been an artificial agreement between them, involving the suspicion of collusion, and on this account he is not afraid of admitting the existence of discrepancies in their narratives. The admission of the theory of the *Urevangelium*, first advanced by Eichhorn, is entirely inconsistent with the fact of these discrepancies, and would render them inexplicable. For if the synoptical writers derived their narratives from the same source, they would exhibit that exact correspondence, and even identity, which St. Chrysostom deprecates and which certainly they do not present. Eichhorn is here hardly consistent with himself, as he recognises the individuality and independence of the Evangelists, and compares their several narratives with his imaginary original in the most elaborate manner. It is instructive to compare the great simplicity and consistency of the earliest traditions of the origin and authorship of the Gospels with the confusion into which their modern critics have fallen, everyone differing from another, and everyone giving as plausible reasons for his theory as those who have preceded him in the unsuccessful search. The explorers are like men fighting in the dark, armed with the most perfect controversial weapons, but without any clear light to give them a proper aim or direction. And, in truth, these records of our faith are like the "seed cast into the ground, which, while men slept and rose night and day, sprang and grew up they knew not how," and we should do well, instead of dissecting the Divine plantation in order to discover the germ, to make that practical and salutary use of it for which alone it was committed to the ground. This work of disintegration and dissection has had its most recent development in the treatise of Mr. Badham which we have just referred to. By a process of reasoning, or rather by a plausible assumption, he has improvised a Petrine Gospel which he alleges to be inserted almost *en masse* into the synoptical Gospels. The earliest Christian writers were content to recognise St. Mark's Gospel as the only authentic record of St. Peter's preaching, and, perhaps from a respect to this primitive tradition, he has not interpolated that Gospel with his supposed Petrine document, though he has divided it (like that of St. Matthew) into two distinct elements. Such a theory might well be termed (in the words of Herrmann on Bishop Blomfield's conjectural emendations of the text of *Æschylus*) a "dangerous innovation on no fixed principle." The interpolations occur chiefly in the earlier half of St. Matthew, while St. Luke's Gospel almost

perishes altogether under the new treatment. Yet the fragments that remain are so entirely disjointed that no connection whatever exists between the portions thus arbitrarily severed. In most cases we have to join together disconnected facts, and even broken sentences, in order to satisfy the requirements of a theory which certainly rests on no foundation either of reason or tradition. It would almost seem as though the new document had been suggested by that equally doubtful discovery, the "Priestly Code" of recent Old Testament criticism, which is so useful an element in the process of disintegration, and so ready an expedient to fall back upon when other arguments fail. It is difficult to see why St. Luke's Gospel, which has a distinctively Pauline character, should be made the special sacrifice to this Petrine ideal. Nor does the author explain the reasons which have led him to assign to Peter so large a portion of the evangelical narrative. It might well be asked, At what period of St. Luke's life was he brought into such close connection with St. Peter as to enable him to be the publisher of what would undoubtedly, if capable of identification, be the most valuable of all the documents of our faith? The preface of St. Luke's Gospel gives no such clue as this to its origin, rather deriving its authority from Apostolic men than from actual Apostles.

The manner in which the apocryphal Gospels and acts withered and fell away from the authentic ones, though almost coeval with them, furnishes a most important argument for the authenticity and originality of the four canonical Gospels. We are apt to assign too great an importance, in this separation of the true from the false, to the Church either in its representative or collective capacity. The apocryphal works perished from authority and from memory from their own inherent weakness. They had no real vitality; they did not represent the religion of Christ as it had been preached by its first proclaimers. Though the earliest published record of the reception of the four canonical Gospels as the true representation of the religion of Christ is rightly declared by Eichhorn to be that of Celsus on the side of its adversaries, and Clement of Alexandria on those of its advocates, we cannot doubt that their general recognition was much earlier. The passage of Celsus deserves a much more careful attention than any which has been hitherto bestowed upon it. "Some of them that believe," he writes, "go to such a length as to change the original writing of the Gospel three times, four times, and even many times."<sup>1</sup> Now, the limit of the three and four times appears to me to point to the recognition of the four

---

<sup>1</sup> Origen, "Con. Cels.," l. ii., c. 31.



canonical Gospels by the early Christians, the indefinite word *πολλαχῆ* referring to the numerous apocryphal writings which had so different a position. Instead of saying "twice" or "thrice," he says three or four times, indicating, we may reasonably conceive, the three synoptical Gospels as having a special character, and the fourth as completing the evangelical record. From the fact that his references are made exclusively to these four, we are corroborated in the view that it was not by mere chance that he used these numbers. At the same time, the passage indicates that the heathen opponents of Christianity believed in a kind of *Urevangelium*, which the Christians are charged with altering and modifying to suit the exigencies of their defence. The traditions which have been handed down to us on the origin of the Gospels by Papias, Clement of Alexandria, Irenæus, Origen and others, though sometimes not easy to reconcile, are far more reasonable and consistent than any of the recent theories which have been put forth to account for their existence.<sup>1</sup>

The labours of the older Fathers of the Church were devoted to the building up of the "City of God." The grand and unique work of St. Augustine which bears that honoured title has been the strength and the comfort of ages of devoted faith. Now, it would seem that the teachers of Christianity are labouring only to pull down and destroy the work of their predecessors, and to prove that the promise of Christ to be the Guide and the Counsellor of His Church to the very end of time has utterly and hopelessly failed. And, to establish the failure of the promise, we are urged to disbelieve the words of Christ which claim a knowledge of the past, and to admit that He merely yielded to a popular opinion when He declared that the Messianic Psalms were the work of David, and that His ancestor according to the flesh "wrote of Him." The doctrine of the Reformation was called "the New Learning"; but it never had any other object but to clear away the mediæval errors which corrupted and almost destroyed the very foundations of that reasonable faith which its Divine Author commended to the honest judgment of all His followers in the words, "Why of yourselves judge ye not righteous judgments?" Now, however, the very groundwork of our faith is being disturbed and broken up, and we may well ask with the Psalmist, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

---

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most difficult to reconcile with the rest is the tradition of Clement of Alexandria, recorded by Eusebius, that the Gospels containing the genealogies were written first—as that of St. Mark, from internal as well as traditional evidence, must certainly have preceded St. Luke's. But as the former was written in the last year of St. Peter's life, there may have been but a slight interval between the two Gospels.

Yet the prophetic promise still lives in all its first force, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundations of this house, and his hands shall finish it." The presence of the great Master-builder of the Church is still in His living temple, and will abide in it for ever. The walls of Jerusalem will yet be built again in all their first strength, and the zeal and watchfulness of the builders will be crowned with the success which they had in that earlier day, and will have to the very end, if we are but true to the cause of Christ, and to the ministry which He has called upon us to fulfil, through His Spirit and to His glory.

ROBERT C. JENKINS.

---

ART. II.—ARCHBISHOP MAGEE:

HIS SERMONS AND SPEECHES.

IT was a day much to be remembered in the city of Norwich when, within the walls of her ancient cathedral, crowds were gathered to hear the great preacher of the Church of England plead the cause of the Christian faith.

For in 1871 the truth and authority of the Christian revelation was boldly and even coarsely denied. Nor was Christianity alone the object of attack. All faith in God, all belief in the soul, all conception of the power of prayer—in a word, all that stood between the soul and a bare materialism was attacked with a vehemence which had not yet subsided into the comparative dulness of Agnosticism. It is to the sermons delivered on this occasion that we shall in the first place call attention, not only on account of their intrinsic excellence, but because they are in so marked a degree characteristic of the preacher and of his style.

Those who knew the Bishop would understand how such a subject and such a scene would move him. He was called to a great effort, and a mighty cause seemed to hang upon his lips. That most sensitive frame would be strung up to the keenest anxiety as the moment of trial drew near. He would feel all this with a nervousness singularly characteristic of himself as he mounted the pulpit steps, and as the last strain of the organ ceased. But on this occasion his eye met a sight well calculated to arouse the combatant within him, for just in front sat Bradlaugh, the arch-sceptic of his own diocese, cynically cracking nuts. "Ah," said the Bishop to himself, "is Saul also among the prophets?"

How wonderfully calculated was all this to stir to the utmost his marvellous gifts! That trenchant logic which seldom perpetrated and never spared a fallacy, that brilliant