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THE CONTEMPORANEOUS ORIGIN OF THE
GOSPELS.

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It can hardly be said that during recent years much progress has been made toward the solution on the old lines of what is known as the "Synoptic Problem".

At the close of last century the theory of an "Ur-Markus" found some favor. It was supposed that in very early times there was in circulation a Gospel which has since been lost but which formed the basis of Mark and of those parts of Matthew and of Luke which are parallel with Mark. Most writers now would, with Professor Vedder, pronounce this idea to be "simply a figment of the critical imagination". (*Baptist Review and Expositor*, July, 1905).

The prevalent view now is that, in the parts of Matthew and Luke that are parallel with Mark, the authors of those two Gospels simply copied Mark—with, however, almost innumerable and certainly inexplicable alterations both in order and diction—and that the remaining parts of Matthew and Luke were gathered from other sources. Yet, half a century ago, Alford proved, as certainly as a Euclid demonstration, that it was impossible that either of the Gospels could in any part have been copied from any other. (*Alford's Greek Testament*, Vol. I., Prolegomena, Section 2).

Alford himself maintained the "Oral Theory", which was at one time popular, but is seldom mentioned now, though how long it will be before it has a revival it is hard to say.

In short, every theory in turn has its vogue, until after a while it is proved to be untenable and goes out of

fashion, and so remains until other theories have passed through a like experience, when, its refutation being by that time forgotten, it emerges again and has a new lease of life.

The majority of biblical scholars leave the question of the origin of the Gospels severely alone. Some indeed go so far as to say that the question is insoluble and like the squaring of the circle must for ever remain an unanswered enigma.

May it not be that the failure of students to find finality on this subject is due to their all starting on a wrong assumption? All the scholars who deal with the question take it for granted that the Gospels were not written, nor any portion of them, until some time—usually a very long time—after the events happened which they narrate. Is it not just possible that this assumption is a false one, and may not this be the reason of the hopeless condition which the discussion has reached? Suppose that, just as an experiment, the subject be studied anew on the hypothesis that the Gospels are composed of contemporary documents, manuscripts written at the very time or soon after the occurrence of the events they record, that is to say during the course of our Lord's ministry, is it not at least conceivable that more satisfactory results may be obtained? At any rate is it not worth while to try the experiment?

Why, it may be asked, should not records of Christ's words and work have been made during the course of His ministry? The time, it may be hoped, is passed for the Apostles to be spoken of as "illiterate fishermen". Four of them, it is true, followed that calling, but they were evidently the proprietors of a large and flourishing business, the commercial side of which would require worldly aptitude and experience for its management, also the keeping of books and the habit of fast writing. The same may be said of the occupation of Matthew, who is first introduced as "sitting at the place of toll". His position was certainly not a low or menial one. He must

have had officers at his command whose duty it would be to enforce compliance with his behests while he himself kept account of money received. Consistently with this, he is shown to be a man of some means, being able to make "a great feast in his house" on the occasion of his resigning office. The brief notices in the New Testament of the other six Apostles (not to mention Judas) do not give the impression that any of them were dull or uneducated; and the fact that they were able to retire from secular business and devote themselves entirely to the service of Christ, seems to imply that they were anything but poor in their worldly circumstances.

It may fairly be assumed that it was purely in an academic sense that Peter and John were said by the "rulers and elders and scribes" to be "unlearned and ignorant men"; they had not, like Paul, been brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel or any other Rabbinic teacher, and instructed according to the strict manner of the law of the fathers. There is plenty of evidence that the two Apostles just named were not only men of great natural ability, but of education and culture. Certainly, they could not have accomplished what they did in the establishment of the infant Church if they had not received in their youth at least a good primary education.

Nor was there anything in the literary conditions of the time to make it unlikely that written notes would be taken while the events were in progress. On the contrary, the masses of ancient manuscripts that have during late years been brought to light in Egypt prove that at that period men were accustomed to commit to writing matters of far less—ininitely less—importance than the sayings and doings of the Savior of the world. It is safe to say that Judea and Galilee were not in this respect inferior to Egypt. It is said of Palestine that its educational conditions in the time of Christ have been surpassed by no country in any age. According to Ederheim, there was a school in every village and every Jewish child was taught to read and write.

That it was the custom in those times to make records of passing events as they occurred is proved by the publication of the *Acta Diurna* at Rome. This was a daily gazette or summary of news, compiled under the authority of the Roman Government, by a staff of editors and reporters, including a number of short-hand writers. It contained an abstract of the proceedings of the public assemblies, the number of births and deaths in the city, notices of marriages and divorces, accounts of the public finances, reports of trials in the law-courts, and news of foreign wars, fires, sports and other matters of interest. The gazette was posted in some public place, where it could be read and copied, and newsvenders made copies, which were sold in Rome and sent to the provinces, where they were eagerly sought after and extensively read.

It seems probable that similar gazettes were published in the larger provincial cities also; for in all parts of the empire men imitated the things that were done in the world's metropolis. Especially would such papers appear in Galilee, which, for its size, was one of the most populous countries in the world, with large producing, manufacturing and commercial interests. For the great intercontinental trade routes crossed one another in Galilee and the contiguous province of Phœnicia. It can hardly be imagined that people of such a time and country would be content to depend merely on rumor, which is always most unreliable, for their knowledge of the things that were happening in the world.

Indeed it can only have been by means of some sort of written publication circulated through the country that some events alluded to in the Gospels, such as the falling of a tower in Siloam, became generally known.

The men and women of those times ought to be thought of as not unlike the people of the present day. Certainly, they were no less intelligent. They had not, it is true, so vast an inheritance as we have of the accumulated inventions and discoveries of the past; but, in the use of such knowledge and advantages as they possessed, they

showed just about as much wisdom and as much folly as people show in this conceited twentieth century.

Now, what should we expect at the present day of men in a station of society similar to that of the Apostles, men of the middle class, if called to a position which could be at all compared with theirs? Should we not expect them as a matter of course to make some written records of the doings and sayings of him to whom they had attached themselves? And when we consider all that is implied in the words, "They left all and followed Him", and realize in some measure how intense must have been the Apostles' regard for, and admiration of, Him at whose bidding they had left their avocations and their homes to become His associates, can we imagine that among them all there would be none to perceive the need of taking written notes and preserving for all time some records of the wonderful works and words of their new Master, and that they would neglect to do so in the whole of the two years during which they continued in His company?

And, even if they themselves failed to think of this, is it not reasonable to suppose that our Lord in His infinite wisdom would suggest it? Beyond question, He had certain definite purposes in choosing the Twelve to be His own immediate followers, and who can doubt that one purpose was to secure permanent records of the things He was about to do and teach? If so, is it likely that He would allow this purpose to be so imperfectly realized as would have been the case if no records were made except from memory a number of years later?

Supposing it to be conceded that the Apostles soon after they were called may have seen the need of making records, the next question is, In what manner did they probably set about to carry out this duty? Well, for one thing, it seems most likely that they wrote their reports in company. It is not likely that they all wrote. There being twelve of them, that would be unnecessary, inconvenient and expensive. But they would all join in helping those who did write, not of course in reporting

Christ's longer addresses, which on this theory must have been taken down while He was speaking, but in the composition of the records of events. Naturally, in thus assisting, some would take a more active part than others. Some might usually be almost silent, only putting in a word now and then. The chief part of the talking would be done by two or three, and there would doubtless be one who by tacit agreement would take the lead and act as chief spokesman for the party. Still all would feel a sense of responsibility and would watch that no error crept into the written statement.

When the Apostles had assembled, probably in the evening, for the purpose of recording the incidents which had recently occurred, one, two or three, as the case might be, would prepare themselves with pen, ink and sheets of papyrus to write. At first there would be general and free conversation and nothing would be written. After a while, one of the party would remark that time was passing and those who were to write had better begin. Soon there would be a hush and the one who acted informally as chief spokesman would begin to dictate a statement, being a narrative in grammatical shape of some recent incident which had specially impressed them and which had no doubt been the subject of the conversation that had just taken place. Before anything was written, however, alternative wordings would be offered by others and the writers would thus be afforded the choice of two or more sentences with which to begin. Then, as the telling of the story proceeded, there would be further interruptions by one and another who might wish to amend some detail, to add some item or to suggest an improvement in the language. In such cases an amendment, addition or variation might be accepted by one of the writers and not by another. Sometimes such interruptions would lead to discussion, with the result that the written narratives might in that place differ widely while yet retaining much that was identical. Sometimes one of the writers might choose not to follow closely the

dictated story, but to trust rather to his own recollection of the facts or his own literary taste. Sometimes the one who usually acted as chief spokesman may have been absent, and then the honor of the position may have been divided between two or three, the resulting diversity being reflected in the manuscripts.

Is it unreasonable to imagine that men such as the Apostles and in their circumstances would, in some such manner as this, try to carry out an obvious duty? If so, would not the result be the production of several sets of notes, bearing in substance, style and language much resemblance to one another and yet showing a great deal of diversity? It will be admitted that resemblance and diversity, curiously intermixed, are among the most striking features of the Synoptic Gospels; the question to be considered is, Are the features of such a character as can be accounted for by the Gospels having been composed of notes dictated and written in some such way as that feebly and imperfectly described above? An answer to this question can only be obtained by a careful comparison of parallel passages placed side by side. This comparison each student should make for himself, but by way of illustration two examples are presented below.

But, before dealing with these, it is necessary to mention a circumstance that further complicates the study of the question. It would take too long to give the reasons here, and probably the statement will be accepted without dispute: If the original notes of which the first three Gospels are composed were really written in the way supposed above, they must have been written in the Aramaic language, and in that case each set of notes must have been separately and independently translated into Greek, when redacted into the form of the Gospels as we now have them. Separately and independently translated, and yet subject to certain common influences that it would take a whole article to elucidate; but which would and do show themselves in identical words and phrases in the translated work.

The point to notice now, however, is that, in addition to variations caused by manner of production of the original documents, the student must expect to find variations due to translation from one language into another.

The first example is the story of the calling of Simon and Andrew and James and John, Matthew iv. 18-22 and Mark i. 16-20.

These passages consist respectively of 89 and 82 Greek words (the text taken being that of Rushbrooke's Synopticon). Analyzed they give the following results:

Greek Words.	Matthew.	Mark.
Exactly alike.....	54	54
The same but differently inflected.....	5	5
Partly alike.....	3	2
Partly alike but differently applied.....	1	1
Quite different.....	26	20
	-----	-----
Total	89	82

The greatest number of consecutive words alike is 9 (Mat., verse 21; Mark, verse 19). The greatest number of consecutive words common to both Gospels in Matthew is 12 (verse 21), but therefrom 2 words contained in Mark are omitted. The greatest number of consecutive common words in Mark is 11 (verse 16), but therefrom 2 words and 3 words contained in Matthew are omitted.

Following in parallel columns are the two passages, taken from the English Revised Version:

Matthew iv. 18-22.

Mark i. 16-20.

And walking.....by the sea of Galilee, he saw two brethren, Simon who is called Peter, and An- drew his brother,..... casting a net into the	And passing along by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simonand An- drew the brother of Simon casting a net in.....the
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sea; for they were fishers. And he... saith unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you..... fishers of men. And they straightway.....left the nets, and followed him. And going on from... thence,...he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother.....in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and.....he called them. And they straightway left the boat and their father,..... and followed him.

sea; for they were fishers. And Jesus said..unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. Andstraightway they left the nets, and followed him. And going on a little further, he saw..... James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending the.... nets. And straightway he called them. And they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after him.

The foregoing passages have no parallel in Luke. (Luke v. 1-11 differs so widely that it seems better to understand it to record a different and later Call). But the section in Mark is immediately followed by one that has a parallel in Luke but not in Matthew. This has been chosen for the second example, namely, the Casting Out of a Demon in the Synagogue at Capernaum, Mark i. 21-28, Luke iv. 31-37.

The passages consists respectively of 122 and 119 Greek words, and analyzed give the following results:

Greek Words.	Mark.	Luke.
Exactly alike.....	64	64
Alike but in a different connection.....	2	2
The same but differently inflected.....	8	8
Partly alike.....	3	3
Quite different.....	45	42
Total	122	119

In Mark verses 24, 25 and Luke verses 34, 35 there are no less than 22 consecutive words alike, an unusually large number. Indeed there are in the former 25 consecutive words common to both Gospels, but therefrom one word contained in Luke is omitted.

The two passages according to the English Revised Version are shown side by side as follows:

Mark i. 21-28.

And they go...into Capernaum;
 and straightway
 on the Sabbath day he entered into the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching; for he taught them as having authority, and not as the scribes. And straightway there was in their synagogue
 a man with an unclean spirit;
and he cried out,
 saying,
 What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth; art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And...the unclean spirit, tearing him and crying with a loud voice, ...came out of him.

Luke iv. 31-37.

And he came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath day:

and they were astonished at his teaching; for his word was with authority.
 And
 in
 the...synagogue there was a man, which had a.....
 spirit of an unclean devil; and he cried out with a loud voice, Ah!
 what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the devil.
had thrown him down in the midst,
 he came out of him, having

..... And they
 were all amazed,
insomuch that
 they questioned among
 themselves, saying, What
 is this? a new teach-
 ing! with authority
he commandeth
 even the unclean spirits,
 and they obey him. And
the re-
 port of..... him went
 out straightway everywhere
 into all.....the
 region of Galilee round
 about.

done him no hurt. And...
amazement came
 upon all, and they spake
 together, one with anothe-
 er,.....saying What
 is this word?.....
for with authority
 and power he commandeth
the unclean spirits,
 and they come out. And
 there went forth a ru-
 mour concerning him.....

 into every place of the
 region round
 about.

The Revised Version is so faithful to the original—different words where possible being used to represent different Greek words of the same meaning—that the foregoing give a very fair idea of identities, similarities and variations in the pairs of reports; but, to appreciate them fully, the sections ought to be copied out from the Greek Testament in parallel columns, and the corresponding words placed in position as in these examples.

It would perhaps be hardly correct to say that the foregoing examples are typical. It may be a question whether a really typical example can be found, for each pair or set of parallels presents peculiar features of its own. The special features of the two chosen are that the identities in phraseology are unusually numerous. This may seem to make them less incompatible with the copying theory than some others that might be chosen. And yet, on examination, how unlikely it will appear that the variations, comparatively few as they are, represent alterations made in copying. What reason could there be for making alterations of such a character? That the alterations, if they be alterations, are not due to care-

lessness is proved by the exact agreement between the narratives in all details of fact. But if they were intentional, what was the motive? It cannot have been a wish either to shorten or to lengthen; for in each Gospel some words are omitted and others added. Besides, many of the variations tend neither to lengthen nor to shorten the story.

If the variations had appeared in two Gospels only, the copying theory might have seemed not impossible, the alterations being in that case due to some strange idiosyncrasy on the part of the author who copied. But it is inconceivable that two separate authors, dealing with the same subject, should both have set themselves to puzzle posterity by making in the text of the narratives they were compiling changes which cannot be described as otherwise than capricious.

It is the consideration of difficulties such as these that has driven many (Sir John Hawkins among others) to look with some favor on the Oral Theory. But then the examples quoted are among the very ones about which Sir John Hawkins says, "It seems difficult to believe they owe nothing to a written Greek source", and, "It appears very unlikely that they could have been handed on so exactly without the use of documents". (*Horae Synopticae*, page 51).

But now, let it be supposed that each pair of sections were severally written by two men at the same time in the company of others, all of whom were assisting in the composition of the story. Each one would try to set down the sentences one by one agreed on as most suitable to describe what was being recorded, yet feeling free to choose among the alternative wordings proposed by one and another, or even to prefer his own. Allowing for the variations afterwards caused by separate translation, would it not be reasonable to expect just such results as those which actually appear?

Quite in harmony with this supposition, but not at all with the copying theory, is the fact so often noticed that

each Gospel has its own characteristics. Some of the features peculiar to Mark are mentioned by Professor Vedder in the article quoted above; but Matthew and Luke has each its peculiarities also. The respective characteristics of the three Gospels are very fully set out in "Horae Synopticae", and are quite sufficient to prove that there is very decided individuality in each Gospel. These marks of individuality are far too numerous to allow the possibility of copying; they manifestly belong either to the original material or are due to the several hands of separate translators.

What has been said so far applies chiefly to the narrative parts which, however, nearly all include short utterances of Christ. These the writers would naturally try to record with the utmost possible accuracy, and accordingly it will be found, as a rule, that it is in the utterances that the closest similarity prevails. Now, if the narrative parts were written at the time and in the manner proposed above, it will be impossible to avoid the conclusion that the longer utterances—the parables and discourses—must have been taken down at the very time and as they were being spoken. It is claimed that careful comparison of these, where contained in more than one Gospel, justifies and compels this conclusion, the differences, with few exceptions, being such as would result merely from the omission by one of words and sentences secured by another, and variations caused by translation.

There is nothing improbable in the supposition that the longer addresses were taken down as they were being delivered. It is not impossible even that some of the disciples were able to write short-hand, for the art was much in use at that time. It may be in the recollection of some readers that, between forty and fifty years ago, soon after the full development of Pittman's system, there was among young men almost a mania for short-hand. It was learned by many youths who had no idea of turning it to professional account. There may have been something of the same kind in the first third of the first century—

that brilliant period produced by prolonged peace and settled government. This may seem to some far-fetched and fantastic, nor is it essential. As said earlier in this article, the secular occupations of Matthew, Peter and the sons of Zebedee would make it necessary for them to become accustomed to writing quickly. This must be obvious to every man of business who considers the real nature of their occupations. Then, there is no reason why our Lord, when reporters were taking down His utterances, may not have spoken slowly for their convenience. The number of addresses preserved in the Gospels is extremely small compared with the number He must have delivered in the course of His ministry subsequently to the choosing of the Twelve, and it is quite conceivable that, in order that some typical and very specially important deliverances of His might be preserved for all time, He may on those occasions have paused between sentences long enough for the reporters to keep pace with Him.

If the original notes contained in the Gospels were thus written contemporaneously with the events, it may be supposed that they would not be allowed to remain dormant after the Ascension and Pentecost. They would doubtless be at once made use of in the work of evangelization and the instruction of converts. They would be copied freely; they would be translated into Greek, and the copies and translations would be widely circulated. Thus would the statement of Papias be justified, that Matthew composed the *logia* in the Hebrew (that is Aramaic) language, and each one translated them as he was able. Paul and other missionaries would take such translated copies with them on their journeys, and their converts again would make copies to keep for their own use.

Meanwhile the original manuscripts would be carefully preserved by the several writers or those to whom they may have entrusted them. These documents consisting of a large number of loose sheets of papyrus, the copies

of them casually made would be unarranged and disconnected. A complete set of any one Evangelist's set of notes would be a rarity, and, even if such could be found, the sheets composing it would not be arranged in their original order. Documents such as these, though useful for purposes of preaching and giving instruction, would not by intelligent believers be regarded as satisfactory, and, before long, attempts would be made by one and another to collect them and edit them in some sort of order. This, it is maintained, is the course of what might be reasonably expected to happen, and it agrees literally with what Luke asserts did happen, (Luke i 1, 2).

At length, those who had charge of the original manuscripts would come to realize the need of a systematic and authoritative arrangement of them being prepared for publication, and then the task of careful translation and redaction of them would be undertaken, or placed in the hands of some competent person. Probably Matthew would translate and redact his own notes. Peter may have given his notes to Mark to edit under his own supervision at Babylon. The third set may have been entrusted to Luke for the same purpose at Jerusalem, at the time of Paul's imprisonment at Cæsarea. Perhaps not exactly as here described, but in some such way, it may be imagined the Gospels assumed the shapes in which they have come down to us under the names of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In this article the Gospel of John has not been mentioned, as it raises different questions altogether. If Matthew, Mark and Luke are composed of contemporaneous notes, John must be also. But in that case the notes of which it is composed must have been written, not like the others in Aramaic, but in Greek, being records of some of our Lord's utterances in that language. For, since the appearance of Dalman's "Words of Jesus" and Deissmann's "Bible Studies", there ought to be no doubt whatever in anyone's mind that our Lord and the Apostles were accustomed to converse in both the

languages that were current in Palestine at that time. Hence followed, on the theory of contemporaneous notes, a natural division of labor. When our Lord spoke in Aramaic, three Apostles, whose work remains in Matthew, Mark and Luke, made notes in that language. When He spoke in Greek, John recorded His utterances in that tongue. To record in two languages some of the Master's words and deeds was quite in accord with the practice of ancient times, as is proved by the many bilingual and trilingual inscriptions that have of late been brought to light.

The theory that the Four Gospels are composed of notes written contemporaneously with the events demands the belief that all things in that connection happened just as they may reasonably be supposed to have happened, providing the truth be admitted of the facts recorded and taking fully into account the circumstances and customs of the time.

The question now is: Do the features of the Gospels themselves when examined in detail bear out the conclusion that they originated in this manner? In a book of which the present writer is the author (*Gospel Problems and Their Solution*, London, 1899), an attempt is made to prove that such is the case; and that on this view everything becomes plain and all difficulties disappear. The book has had a fairly wide circulation and the theory it contends for is steadily gaining ground in Australia, and to some extent in Great Britain also. But the subject is one that requires close and patient study. One thing can be confidently promised to anyone who will heartily undertake the task, and that is that he will find it an occupation of enthralling interest and intense delight.