

The Lost Ending of St. Mark's Gospel.

ANYONE who reads the Gospel according to St. Mark as a whole, like any other book, is impressed with its dramatic character. This consists not only in the vivid style of writing, but also in a literary construction which is found to be built upon a definite plan which is dramatic in form. It has long been realised that as a "Life of Christ" the gospel is inadequate. The first thirty years are not mentioned; the period of public ministry is only sketched in, with very little regard for exact chronology except in the description of the last week, which is given in increasing detail as the Passion is approached. On the other hand there has been a tendency to treat the document as no more than a collection of reminiscences, culled by Mark from the Apostle Peter, the emphasis being according to the vividness of Peter's memory. This latter view, however, does not allow sufficiently for definiteness of purpose, for it is clear that, whatever sources were available to the writer, he arranged his material according to a plan, so that the gospel as a whole might tell a certain message. What was that plan, and what was the message to be expressed?

An analysis of the material reveals that the gospel consists for the most part of a series of episodes, each complete in itself, but having a relation to its neighbours according to message and subject matter. These episodes form themselves into three main groups, and each group is held together partly by chronology, partly by geographical setting, and partly by subject matter. I suggest that the subject matter was the most important of the three in the writer's mind, and that time and place were only form and setting for the message, so that the three groups are like "acts" in a drama, the episodes being like "scenes". It is not suggested that there was any intention of performance on the stage, though the modifications necessary for such a thing would not be unduly great.

Here then is the summary.

In Act I. the setting is Galilee and the theme is summarised in the message "The Kingdom of God is at hand". Jesus appears and challenges the powers of evil in every form, calls for followers and defines the nature and scope of the Kingdom. (Mark i. 14 to vi. 6.)

Act II. has a wider setting and is more in the nature of a discussion as to the meaning and implications of the Kingdom of God. The current popular ideas of power are revealed in their true nature and contrasted with God's purpose. Jesus

is recognised by his disciples as the Messiah and they are led reluctantly to consider the idea that "the Christ must suffer". (Mark vii. 7 to x. 45.)

In Act III. the discussion is acted out on the stage of history in Jerusalem. The Christ throws down his challenge, which is accepted, and we see Him facing alone the forces of evil which are massed against him, until he is brought to a painful and shameful death. The Act closes with the recognition of his authority by a Roman centurion, a Jewish Councillor and a few women who remain faithful. (Mark x. 46 to xv. 47.)

In addition to these three Acts there is a prologue at the beginning and an epilogue at the end. The prologue consists of a title page, a quotation from prophecy, the appearance of the forerunner, the Divine call and the commitment of Jesus to his mission.

An objection may be raised by followers of the school of "Form Criticism" that Mark was using more primitive sources and that there is evidence of the influence of the Church upon the setting which Mark gives. But this does not affect the main point at issue, which is not concerning the authenticity of this episode or that, but concerning the message which Mark intended to convey to his readers. For it is to be presumed that Mark used his material intelligently and arranged it according to a plan, both for the instruction of the converted and for propaganda amongst those who were within reach of the written word. If this is Mark's purpose, then it is clear that the message is incomplete if it stops short at the Passion story. For then the gospel depicts a wonderful and heroic personality, one of the greatest of the martyrs, but conveys the impression that God's purpose was defeated in the person of His greatest representative on earth. Such a message cannot be called "Good News". No! That story must go on to describe the experience which changed the cowering disciples into flaming apostles and the way in which God's purpose was vindicated and continued in them.

Now in Peter's speech to the company assembled in the house of Cornelius we have a simple summary of the gospel which he preached, which is at the same time a summary of the gospel of Mark. Thus in Acts x. 36 to 39 (Moffatt) we read

"You know the message he sent to the sons of Israel when he preached the gospel of peace by Jesus Christ (who is Lord of all); you know how it spread over the whole of Judaea, starting from Galilee after the baptism preached by John—how God consecrated Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went about

doing good and curing all who were harassed by the devil; for God was with him. As for what he did in the land of the Jews and of Jerusalem, we can testify to that. They slew him by hanging him on a gibbet."

That is practically as far as the gospel of Mark takes us. But Peter went on to say:—Acts x. 40 to 43 (Moffatt).

"But God raised Him on the third day, and allowed Him to be seen not by all the people but by witnesses whom God had previously selected, by us who ate and drank with Him after His resurrection from the dead, when He enjoined us to preach to the People, testifying that this was He whom God had appointed to be judge of the living and of the dead. All the prophets testify that everyone who believes in Him is to receive remission of sins through His name".

This then is Peter's gospel in summary form and it seems likely that Mark's gospel would cover the same ground, in which case the latter part of the speech would summarise Mark just in the same way as the former part seems to do. This suggestion would be supported by the strong tradition that Mark obtained his information largely from Peter.

Our discussion so far has led us to the possibility that Mark's original gospel included something like a fourth Act, the contents of which are summarised for us by Peter in the latter part of his speech at the house of Cornelius.

We now turn to the "epilogue" (Mark xvi. 1 to 8) and find that it is quite inadequate from this point of view. In fact it has become a commonplace of gospel criticism that the 8th verse is no ending at all. Thus H. G. Wood writing in Peake's Commentary says:—

"Indeed the last sentence is not complete. It runs in Greek *ephobounto gar* (for they feared), and though sentences ending in the particle *gar* are not unknown in Greek, yet as the end of a chapter or a book such a sentence is intolerable, and the verb 'they feared' calls for an object, perhaps 'the Jews'. Moreover this story of the women is clearly intended to lead up to other stories of appearances in Galilee to Peter and the Twelve, which are not narrated. Either Mark never completed his book or its original ending has been lost."

Most scholars seem to favour the suggestion that the original gospel was complete but that it was mutilated in the only existent copy. Sometimes the part that has been torn off is referred to as the "lost page", but a page would be quite

inadequate for the purpose intended. What we should expect would be something at least as long as each of the previous "Acts", and that would require a space corresponding to four or five chapters in our gospel. Can we find any traces of this lost section or has it been lost beyond recovery?

It is necessary at this point for us to turn to other writings in the New Testament and there we discover that the writer of Luke and Acts has given us the message we are looking for (and a good deal more). Scholars are agreed that in writing these books Luke was dependent upon earlier sources, one of which is the gospel of Mark. In comparing the two gospels it becomes clear that for the most part Luke's method was to lift whole sections from his sources and fit them together after the style of a newspaper editor with his scissors and paste. In this way Markan material is not greatly altered in its Lukan form. It is generally assumed, however, that the document which Luke had in his possession and used so freely was the gospel as we know it (or nearly so) and that he used it in his gospel as far as it would go. There are very good reasons why Luke should choose the particular point which he selected for dividing his two books from one another. But these reasons need not include the finish of any particular source, and it is possible that when he started upon his second book he would continue the use of some of them. And it is possible that among these sources there yet remained a portion of the gospel of Mark. Can we trace any Markan material in the book of the Acts of the Apostles?

We have reached the point at which we know the kind of thing for which we are looking and the place where we expect to find it. There remains, before the search takes place, the necessity of laying down certain criteria by which Markan material can be recognised and can be distinguished from material from other sources. Such a point requires more detailed treatment than is possible in such a paper as this, and its application is made more difficult by the fact that Luke did sometimes modify his sources in the interests of style. There are, however, certain general principles which can be discovered and which may form a pretty good guide. In the first place Mark always writes in a vivid style, making the figures stand out clearly in the narrative. Thus B. H. Streeter in his book *The Four Gospels* says, "Mark is one of those people who simply cannot tell a story badly!" Closely linked with this matter of style is Mark's interest in the marvellous and the miraculous. Furthermore it is expected that in Mark's narrative Peter will not be far away. When Peter is in the centre of the picture the Markan origin of that passage is

not proved thereby but is at least suggested. There are certain tricks of expression, words and phrases which distinguish Mark from the others. For instance he is very fond of the expression "they were amazed". He also sometimes piles up descriptive matter, repeating the same idea in different words as much as to three times. An example of this is to be seen in the account of the Transfiguration in which Mark says (Mark ix. 3) "His garments became glistening, exceeding white; so as no fuller on earth can whiten them". It will be noticed that in this case both Matthew and Luke shorten the description of this brightness. This fact robs this criterion of some of its value, because in seeking for Markan material in the writings of Luke, we shall expect this Markan style to have been modified. But, if, on the other hand, this style still peeps through, and Luke has allowed it to remain, then the fact that he has copied such a passage from Mark seems likely. Now in Acts iii 8 Luke describes the lame man that has been healed as "walking and leaping and praising God". Is not this a Markan touch. Again in verse 10 we are told "they were filled with wonder and amazement". Further investigation reveals the fact that the whole incident of the healing of this lame man is thoroughly in keeping with the sort of thing that Mark has written elsewhere. There is the vivid style, the interest in the miraculous, and the fact that Peter is in the centre of the story. Here at any rate we have some confidence that we have discovered a fragment of Mark's original gospel before it was mutilated. Further investigation reveals other passages which may also reasonably be attributed to the same source. They are as follows:—

Acts iii. 1 to iv. 33.

Peter is used to heal an impotent man. He explains that the power exhibited by Jesus is by His death and resurrection transmitted to his disciples. Peter and John are put into prison, stand before the Sanhedrin and are dismissed with a warning. The Church welcomes them with a prayer of joy and they are filled with the Holy Spirit after the manner of Pentecost.

Acts ix. 31 to x. 48.

Growth of the Church. Peter at Lydda and Joppa. Peter is guided to Cornelius and a Pentecost to the Gentiles follows.

Acts xii. 1 to 24.

Peter miraculously released from prison. Divine judgement on Herod.

The gospel may have closed with the words "the Church of God grew and multiplied". In the next verse in Acts the

writer signalises the end of the Markan source by introducing John Mark in person,

The above passages in all probability do not exhaust the material which was contained in Mark's gospel, but it is likely that there are others which cannot be recovered with any confidence. Some material may have been omitted by Luke altogether because he had access to another source which he preferred. An example of this is to be found in the story of Pentecost which occurs in Act 2 and this would account for the fact that Pentecost seems to have been described twice (see Acts iv. 31), the two descriptions having come from two different sources. Other material may have been used by Luke or others, but has been so much written over that its Markan flavour has been lost. Either or both of these considerations would account for a definite gap in the argument which occurs between Mark xvi. 8 and Acts iii. 1. In this gap we should expect some description of the process by which the demoralised disciples became confident and enthusiastic apostles. Such a description is contained in the account of Pentecost, but this is probably non-Markan. But it is also contained in the addendum to the Fourth gospel (John xxi.) which tells how Peter returned to his fishing, accompanied by some others, how Jesus appeared to them, and how Peter is forgiven and restored. Also in Matthew xxviii. 8 to 20 there is a briefer and less vivid description of an appearance of the Risen Lord in Galilee. Are both of these a description of the same events and are they a retelling in their own style of material which the writers obtained from the original gospel of Mark? We do not know, but it is an attractive theory.

Returning to the passages enumerated above which we can attribute with some confidence to a Markan source, we find that they go a long way towards making up a fourth "Act" in the gospel drama which Mark tells. What is the message which this "Fourth Act" expresses? In the first messages of Jesus He proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was a crisis which was upon men and that evil was challenged by the powers of good manifested among them in the wonderful works of God. In the "Second Act" the nature and method of this crisis was discussed and shown to be coming to a focus in the suffering of the Messiah. In the "Third Act" this truth was enacted on the stage of history at Jerusalem. In the "Fourth Act" the disciples come forward as witnesses to the meaning and challenge of this crisis. The Cross is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God who has vindicated His purpose and made His love to triumph in the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. They press home the challenge to every individual

hearer, and their message is supported by the same evidences of divine power which were manifested by Jesus in Galilee in the "First Act". But the challenge is not only individual in its application, but its scope has been widened to include the Gentiles, symbolised in the person of Cornelius. Thus we have a message, dramatic in form, based upon historical events, which was really "Good News of God" and was likely to make an appeal to readers in Rome, where the gospel was in circulation.

Let us summarise the results of our investigation.

First, we have discovered that Mark makes use of his material (chiefly consisting of reminiscences of events in Galilee and Jerusalem obtained from the Apostle Peter) to set forth a message in dramatic form concerning the challenge of the Kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, and the good news that through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus the power of the Kingdom of God is available for every believer.

Secondly, we have discovered some elements in the book of the Acts of the Apostles which are likely to form part of the lost ending of Mark. At the same time we have carried the analysis of the sources behind the book of the Acts of the Apostles a stage further.

Thirdly, we have made clear and more complete the message which was current in the Church of Rome in her earliest days. May we not go on to suggest that in Mark's gospel in its longer form we have the kind of propaganda which was actually in circulation in Rome at the very time when Vespasian, on active military service in Judaea, was proclaimed Emperor by the legionaries stationed in Britain.

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Two Reports worthy of wide circulation and careful study are the *Report of the Special Committee appointed by the Baptist Union Council on the question of Union between Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians* (Baptist Union Publication Department, fourpence), and *Report of the Special Committee appointed by the same Council to consider the attitude of the Denomination to War* (Baptist Union Publication Department, fourpence).