

ARTICLE VII.

FERRIS'S "FORMATION OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT."¹

BY REVEREND PARKE P. FLOURNOY, D.D.,
BETHESDA, MARYLAND.

THIS is a book on a subject of acknowledged obscurity. We do not know much about the formation of the New Testament. There is but little contemporary literature to throw light on the subject; and the author of this book, which deals with it, does not seem to wish to lessen the difficulties which encompass it, by using such light as we have. He claims that the New Testament church had no New Testament, and seems disposed to think that it would probably be better if we had none; or rather, that instead of a closed canon we should still be guided by "open vision," with writings added to those which we have in our New Testament, and much of that omitted.

The book is published by the American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia, and is written by one who is (or was) a pastor, presumably interested in the spiritual welfare of all whom he can reach with his voice or pen. Yet, to one reader at least, the book, instead of being likely to minister to the edification of its readers, seems calculated to unsettle their faith.

His treatment of the New Testament is such as to throw doubt (1) upon its completeness, (2) upon the authenticity

¹The Formation of the New Testament. By George Hooper Ferris, A.M. Pp. 281. 90 cents, *net*.

of parts of it, and (3) on its authority as a guide to faith and godly living. His views of inspiration are of the loosest. His presentation of the facts connected with the formation of the New Testament is exceedingly one-sided and defective. While professing a conscientiousness which he reproaches the great mass of his brethren in the ministry as lacking, he yet seems to be so under the influence of his theory about the formation of the New Testament, that he is incapable of presenting the facts in an unprejudiced way. There is an utter lack of balance in his treatment. His finger is always on the scale which he wishes to go down. He continually underestimates the importance of the dates and genuineness of the New Testament books, and of apostolic authority in connection with their production and their use by the church. He is very earnest in presenting the claims of apocryphal literature to a place beside the books of the New Testament. He seems especially anxious to impress the reader with the "vast mass" of literature out of which he represents the books in our New Testament as having been selected by arbitrary ecclesiastical authority. He pours contempt on portions of the New Testament, and exalts to the highest rank such a book, e. g., as the "Shepherd of Hermas," and speaks of it as more generally read and admired by early Christians than any book in our New Testament.

Most readers will probably agree that, if what has been said above is true, "The Formation of the New Testament" is a dangerous book. I verily believe it is; and will now proceed to show that, in spite of the very favorable notices of it in many religious publications, the objections to it which have been mentioned are well founded. It should be said, in advance, however, that it is not intended to intimate that the writer *intends* to mislead: he seems entirely sincere. But his

doubts about the New Testament, expressed with unusual force as they are, are all the more dangerous to his readers, in this "age of doubt," by reason of the very sincerity with which they are expressed. The fact that the book bears the imprimatur of one of the largest and most orthodox Protestant denominations, and is written by a minister of the gospel, will commend it to the confidence of a multitude of readers who would not have been reached or affected by a similar book written by an acknowledged skeptic. The many true and excellent things said — and remarkably well said — will aid in commending the dangerous views, advocated with great skill and no little learning.

But let us look into the book, and see whether the serious charges made against it are true. It is well to begin with what is the main contention of the author. He states it as follows:—

"In the middle of the second century we find that our New Testament books were mixed in with a great mass of literature, containing Epistles, homilies, prophecies, apocalyptic visions, apostolic histories, and gospel narratives. No effort had been made to sift this material, and some of these books were prized more highly than those which eventually found an entrance into the authoritative collection" (pp. 14-15).

The most dangerous errors, as has often been remarked, are half-truths. At the middle of the second century there were some writings which *some* may have considered almost on a level with the books of our New Testament, and, later, a large number of apocryphal writings claiming apostolic authorship was in existence, and some of these are attached to some ancient manuscripts. That there was "a great mass of literature" at the middle of the second century of as early origin as the books of the New Testament, and as fully accepted as authoritative by the great body of Christians of

that time, is utterly untrue. Let us hear Professor Caspar René Gregory, of Leipzig, who is regarded as the successor of Tischendorf as the first textual expert in the world. In a recent work, speaking of Clement of Rome, he says:—

“According to the theories which represent his time as one that overflowed with evangelical and epistolary literature, that would lead us to assume the existence of twenty or fifty Gospels and numerous letters, it would have been almost impossible for him to have written so much, so long a letter, without quoting here and there, or betraying in passing a knowledge of the contents of Gospels and letters that are unknown to us.”¹

And Dr. Gregory is a higher critic too. Yet so he finds the state of the case to be in a period about a half-century earlier than the middle of the second century. Let us see how it was at a later period.

Irenæus, writing in the episcopate of Eleutherus (174-189, Kurtz), writes of the New Testament books. Let us see what the veteran New Testament scholar of Cambridge University (England), Professor V. H. Stanton, has to say of his testimony on this point:—

“It is impossible that Irenæus should have made his statements on the subject of the Four Gospels with such calm assurance, if within the period since he reached or had nearly reached man's estate, that is since *circa* 155 A.D., any one of them had been commonly spoken of as a work recently introduced, or if any other Gospel besides these had been treated as equal to them, in any of the leading Churches of Christendom with which he was acquainted.”²

Thus the most prominent Christian in Rome about 100 A.D. and the chief Christian writer of his time in Gaul about 180 A.D. seem to be entirely ignorant of the existence of “a great mass of literature” and of the fact stated by our author in the twentieth century that “some of these books were prized

¹ The Canon and Text of the New Testament, pp. 65 f.

² The Gospels as Historical Documents, p. 274.

more highly than those which eventually found an entrance into the authoritative collection."

Professor Jülicher, of Marburg, quotes¹ Th. Zahn as saying:—

"The third generation after Christ (c. 100) the principal parts at least of the New Testament were already an actually working authority, recognized as binding in all parts of the Church."

So far as the Gospels are concerned, the case seems to have continued the same a hundred years later. Clement of Alexandria writes:—

"Primum quidem, in nobis traditis quatuor Evangelis non habemus hoc dictum, sed in eo, quod est secundum Ægyptios" ("First, then, we have not this saying² in the four Gospels that have been handed down to us, but in that according to the Egyptians").

This very clearly shows that the four Gospels were regarded, to use Dr. Sanday's happily adapted phrase, as "a garden enclosed," all so-called Gospels of whatever character—ascetic, like the little-known one "according to the Egyptians"; docetic, like that according to Peter; or Ebionite, like that according to the Hebrews—being carefully excluded. If Clement of Alexandria knew the whole Christian church better than any other man of his day, Origen probably knew the church and all its literature, twenty-five or thirty years later, more perfectly than any other man of his generation. When we open Origen's "Commentary on John," and read (i. 6), "Now the Gospels are four," we find that, even at that late date, after much of the apocryphal matter had been produced, there was no great need of "sifting."

When we remember what titanic efforts radical critics have made to discredit the Fourth Gospel, it is refreshing to glance

¹ Introduction to the New Testament, p. 460.

² The "saying" purported to be our Lord's answer to a question by Salome.

down the page a little way and find this greatest scholar of his age, born only about eighty-five years after the death of the last of the apostles, writing these words:—

“The Gospels then being four, I deem the first fruits of the Gospels to be that which you¹ have enjoined me to search into according to my powers, the Gospel of John, that which speaks of him whose genealogy had already been set forth, but which begins to speak of him at a point before he had any genealogy.”

We have looked into the state of the case before and after the period — the middle of the second century — at which our author represents “our New Testament books” as “mixed in with a great mass of literature, containing Epistles,” etc., and “some of these books” “prized more highly than those which eventually found entrance into the authoritative collection,” and found that, though other works are occasionally quoted or referred to, it is evident that the New Testament books alone were accepted by the whole church as the authoritative and normative records of Christianity, at least so far as the Gospels are concerned.

Let us look at the acknowledged productions of the most eminent man and martyr who lived and wrote just at this time — the middle of the second century — Justin.

It is perfectly natural that a man born in Palestine about the time of the last apostle's death, or soon after, should have known of unwritten traditions about Him who had wrought his miracles and spoken his wonderful words there during the preceding century — and of some written by the “many” of whom Luke speaks, and that he would mention some facts not mentioned in our Gospels. Only a fraction of all these is recorded in the four Gospels, and it is not strange to find some references to things not found in our Gospels in Justin Martyr's apologies to the Emperor Antoninus Pius and in his

¹Ambrosius.

dialogue with a Jewish disputant about Christ. The legend of the fire in the Jordan at the baptism of Christ (like that of the angel descending and troubling the waters of the pool of Bethesda,¹ a statement which does not appear in our earliest Greek texts or in the Sinaitic Palimpsest) may be one of these oral traditions.

But, after all efforts, it seems that no critic has been able to identify any such statement of Justin with known texts of apocryphal Gospels.² There is now no doubt, however, as to Justin's use of all four of our Gospels. The veteran New Testament critic Dr. Bernhard Weiss, of Berlin University, speaks on this point thus:—

"However natural it may be to assume that Justin made use of an extra-canonical, heretical, or apocryphal Gospel, we find no adequate reason for such assumption if we take into account the growing insignificance of the features which cannot be traced to our Gospels, in proportion to the rich material which leads to their present form."³

Any one who will take the trouble to read, for instance, the fifteenth chapter of Justin's "First Apology," made up to a large extent, of quotations from the Synoptic Gospels, will find it impossible to believe that he did not read Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We, indeed, find Justin in appealing to the Emperor quoting the Greek philosophers, with whose works Antoninus might well be presumed to be acquainted; and we also find him referring to Plato and Socrates as almost Christians. But as he affirms that Plato was acquainted with Old Testament Scriptures,⁴ this is not very strange. Neither is it strange that in speaking to the Emperor of Christ as the *Λόγος*, "the Word," that he should speak of Plato's views of

¹ John v. 4.

² G. T. Purves, *Stone Lectures* (Princeton), p. 189.

³ *Manual of Introduction to the New Testament*, sect. 7. 2.

⁴ *First Apology*, chaps. lix., lx.

the Logos. His theology may, indeed, have been tintured with some of his original views as a Greek philosopher, but this should not blind us to the fact that, for his knowledge of Christ, he continually refers, both in his apologies to the Emperor and his dialogue with the Jew, to "the memoirs of the apostles," "memoirs of the apostles and their followers," as if referring to Matthew and John, who were apostles, and Mark and Luke, who were followers of apostles.¹ He also uses the expression "the apostles, in the memoirs drawn up by them, which are called *Gospels*."² He shows, too, what was the estimate placed by Christians of the middle of the second century upon the Gospels as a part of the Holy Scripture, in his brief view of Christian worship:—

"On the day called Sunday there is gathering together of all who dwell in city and country with one accord (or in one place), and the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read."³

He then describes the administration of the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

By reading the sixty-first chapter of the "First Apology" one can see an outline of our Saviour's conversation with Nicodemus on the necessity of the new birth and of its spiritual and mysterious nature. The view given of Christ throughout is that he is the Word of God. This is by no means a Unitarian view of Christ; yet Dr. James Drummond, who is probably the most learned Unitarian writer and professor in the world to-day, has this to say:—

"I must conclude, therefore, as best satisfying on the whole the facts of the case, not only that Justin regarded the Fourth Gospel as one of the historical 'memoirs' of Christ, but that it is not improbable that he believed in its Johannean authorship."

¹ See Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, chap. ciii.

² First Apology, chap. lxvi.

³ First Apology, chap. lxvii.

In spite of all this, our author, however, tells us:—

"He [Justin] can be taken as a certain testimony to the fact that in the year 150 A.D. the Church in Rome did not possess a new collection of documents that could be placed side by side with the Old Testament as a canon of authority" (p. 58).

That Justin used extensively the Epistles of Paul as well as the four Gospels is made clear by Dr. Bernhard Weiss in his "Introduction to the New Testament,"¹ to which, for brevity's sake, the reader must be referred. His use of the Epistle of James,² of First Peter,³ and of Acts⁴ is clearly shown. His knowledge of the Revelation is indicated by such words as these:—

"There was a man with us [Christians] whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied by a revelation that was made to him."⁵

Then follows a reference to the "thousand years . . . the general . . . eternal resurrection and judgment of all men," which shows that the book of Revelation in the New Testament was meant (Rev. xx.).

It is true that Justin's quotations are often evidently from memory, and not always verbally accurate; and it is likely that the text he used was in many cases slightly different from our "Received" text, and also from the Westcott and Hort text; but this does not affect the fact of quotation. His quotations from the Old Testament are very similar to those from the New in this respect. They, too, are often inaccurate. We must remember that there were no chapters and verses to facilitate reference, and that Alexander Cruden was not yet born.

¹ Sect. 7. 4. It must be said, however, that Weiss does not think that Justin considered the Epistles of Paul equal in authority with the Old Testament Scriptures.

² Dial. xvi.

³ Dial. lxxii.

⁴ First Apol. xxxix, xl, l

⁵ Dial. lxxxl.

But what is more convincing still is the fact that there came to Rome about 150 A. D. a Greek philosopher (Tatian) who, under Justin's influence, became a believer in Christ; and we now have in his extant writings not only quotations from the Gospels and other books of the New Testament, but the four Gospels in a very unique form. Tatian prepared with great skill an edition of the Gospels so woven together as to give a continuous narrative of Christ's life and ministry, his death and resurrection, so far as it could be done in the words of the four Gospels.

Hence our author objects to Tatian and his Diatessaron, or Harmony of the Gospels, more seriously even than he does to Justin. And why? Ah, he sees here that his theory is in danger! In Tatian the four Gospels appear united in a unique way, and show a *Gospel* canon in existence. Dr. Gregory is no conservative critic; and yet what does he see in the Diatessaron?

"For Tatian made a harmony of the Gospels. Now what Gospels did he use? The Gospel to the Hebrews, or a Syriac or a Hebrew Gospel? . . . He called it the Through Four, which is a name taken directly from the Four Gospels. The Greek name is Diatessaron. But what four Gospels did he use? Our four Gospels. The four Gospels of the Church. The only one of the four that anyone would have been inclined to have doubts about, would have been the Gospel of John, and Tatian began precisely with verses from that Gospel."¹

And he uses ninety-six per cent of John's Gospel.

Dr. Gregory continues:—

"He appears to have known pretty much all our New Testament books, and I affirm that an educated Christian at Rome at that time could not help knowing them."

Now, strange to say, our author endeavors to use the Diatessaron to support two of his contentions; namely, that there was no New Testament at the middle of the second

¹ Canon and Text of the New Testament, p. 123.

century, and that the canon was formed by arbitrary ecclesiastical authority (p. 53). There is just enough truth in this to make his statement dangerous to one's confidence in the New Testament — an object which the author seems to have in view throughout his whole discussion. It is true that there was no canon clearly authorized by the church universal in an ecumenical council; for there was no such organic unity of the church at the time, and the first ecumenical council was not held till about one hundred and seventy or seventy-five years later — and that council did not *make* a New Testament canon. When the Third Council of Carthage (397 A. D.) acted on the canon, it did nothing toward the "formation of the New Testament," but simply recognized the New Testament which had been in existence long before, placed upon it the testimony of its approval for the use of the church, and excluded some writings which had come to cling to it like barnacles on a ship. The scraping off of these hindering elements has caused our author much displeasure.

Dr. Gregory's idea of the "formation of the New Testament" seems quite different from that set forth in the book before us. He does not think that there was no New Testament in existence before the Third Council of Carthage by any means. He recognizes the essential fact

"that the larger number of the books of the New Testament were from a very early period beyond all doubt in possession of and were diligently used by many Christians."¹

Then, as to the method of the formation of the New Testament, he goes on to say:—

"We have to seek for signs of the combination of, the putting together of, the uniting of, two or more books in such a way that they were to remain together as forming a special and definite volume of a more or less normative character for the use of Christians and the Church."

¹ Canon and Text of the New Testament, p. 8.

Now, does it not look as if there was a "uniting of" more than two of these different writings in the Diatessaron, made up of the very words of our Gospels, to give as full a view as possible of Christ's embassy for the salvation of the lost? Does not the very form in which it comes to us indicate that it was for the public services of the church, divided as it is into fifty-five sections, so as to cover the fifty-two, or fifty-three, sabbaths of the year and holy days like that of the celebration of our Saviour's resurrection? ¹

As to the date of the preparation of the Diatessaron by Tatian, Dr. Sanday thinks it not improbable that some rough draft of it was used by Tatian and Justin together, ² as many other scholars think also, because of the many instances of the combinations of the quotations of different Gospels in the Apologies and Dialogue. Harnack says of Tatian's Diatessaron, that "it cannot have been produced during his later years." ³

Who can fail to see in this Diatessaron of Tatian the existence of a most important part of the New Testament canon? But definition of the canon by ecclesiastical authority, a thing of later times, is a secondary matter to this. This gathering together in this unique form for private reading, and especially for the public services of the church, of our four Gospels,

¹ The Syrians, doubtless, were Quartodecimans, as we know that Polycarp was. His visit to Anicetus at Rome was made, quite probably, while the Diatessaron was in course of preparation.

² Bampton Lectures, p. 301.

³ Harnack is confident that it was first written in Greek, and afterwards translated into Syriac for the use of Syriac Christians. Dr. Gregory also holds this view; though Dr. Rendel Harris thinks it was made up from a Syriac version of the separate Gospels. However this may be, it was probably the work of some years, and was at least begun soon after the middle of the second century — not improbably in collaboration with Justin Martyr. Our author, too, says: "Undoubtedly Tatian constructed this book in Rome, and took it with him to Syria" (p. 52).

and those only, with such reverent care for the very words of the Gospels that not even explanatory phrases are introduced, shows that the Gospels were the fully established records of our Saviour's life, and indicates that they had long been accepted as the "memoirs of the apostles," as Justin calls them.

This book on "the formation of the New Testament" entirely ignores another remarkable discovery throwing no little light on the subject — the Syriac Gospels discovered by Mrs. Lewis, of Cambridge, England, in company with her twin sister, Mrs. Gibson, at the St. Catherine convent on Mount Sinai. Our author has been a very diligent student of Harnack's "History of Dogma"; yet he has not noticed at all what Harnack says about what has a much more vital bearing on the formation of the New Testament. In the *Preussische Jahrbücher*, May, 1898, Harnack, after mentioning the Apology of Aristides and the Diatessaron of Tatian as important discoveries, uses these words:—

"But of still greater value was the find which we owe to a learned Scotch lady, Mrs. Lewis."

"As the text is almost completely preserved, this *Syrus Sinaiticus* is one of the most important witnesses for our Gospels; nay, it is extremely probable that it is the *most* important witness for our Gospels."

A very elaborate and learned article in the *Church Quarterly Review* (London) for April, 1903, after reviewing the discussions of Hjelt, Gwilliam, Zahn, and Burkitt on the respective dates of the four Syriac versions of the Gospels, places them in the following order: 1. The Lewis Palimpsest; 2. Diatessaron; 3. Curetonian; 4. Peshitta.

If the Lewis Palimpsest of the four Gospels is older than the Diatessaron of Tatian, Harnack is certainly right in his estimate of the value of this discovery; for it shows us all

four of our Gospels already translated into a different language from that in which they were written, and already gathered and combined in a Gospel canon from which all other elements are excluded, quite early in the second century.

Another very important witness — one who testifies to the fact that before the year 125 A. D. the rest of the New Testament was already "formed"—is not called into court by the author of "The Formation of the New Testament." But the discussion of the Apology of Aristides must be reserved for another article.