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THE

CHURCHMAN

NOVEMBER, 1892.

ART. I.—THE COMPOSITION OF THE GOSPELS.

PART I.

THE existence of the four Gospels is a literary phenomenon of great significance. No one knows with certainty how they were written, or when they were written, or by whom they were written. They have certain features in common, and they have certain features which distinguish them each from the other. The similarity is greatest in the three first, and the difference is greatest in the fourth. Doubt has been thrown on the three first because of their resemblance, and the fourth has been doubted because of its difference. It is the fact of their correspondence and their disagreement which constitutes the insoluble problem of their composition. It is no part of my object to attempt to solve that problem, but rather to point to certain inferences which seem to follow from the facts of the problem itself.

There are four narratives which have come down to us that give an account of the life, actions, teaching, and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. These narratives have secured a position which separates them absolutely from all other narratives of a like kind which purport to treat of the same subject-matter. It is needless to take account of the so-called apocryphal Gospels, because no one denies that our canonical Gospels stand on an entirely different footing from them. Whether in themselves trustworthy or not, they are not for a moment to be compared with the others.

But if the problem of the likeness and the unlikeness of the four Gospels is insoluble, there is fortunately no need to attempt to solve it. The Gospels are here; we have them in our possession. We can inquire into their genuineness, but we cannot discover their origin; nor is it necessary to do so, any

more than it is necessary to discover the origin of mankind or of the world in which we live. As practical men we have to deal with facts, and these are facts which are sufficiently patent and obvious, however hopelessly they may elude our investigation. It would be interesting to know how mankind first came into existence and how the universe was first made, but it is too much to suppose that any researches or investigations of ours will ever discover. And yet it is on inquiries of this kind that the ingenuity of mankind has been wasted, because the exercise of the ingenuity of man is always a phenomenon of intense interest to himself. And the inquiry into the origin of the Gospels is a matter of the same kind as these.

The first question that suggests itself is the relation between the several Gospels. Does one evangelist borrow from another, or does each write independently of the rest? With regard to the three synoptical Gospels, each in turn has been supposed the earliest, and each to have been the source from which the other two have borrowed, and this in every case by the advocates basing their conclusions mainly upon the phenomena presented by the text. But on any supposition of priority, the difficulty arises on what principle and with what object the particular selection has been made by those who are supposed to have written later. In the case of St. Mark, for example, though his narrative is the briefest, it is in many respects the fullest with regard to incident and circumstance in those matters which he relates in common with the others. If he wrote later than they, and supplemented their narrative with these minute additions, why did he omit so much which they had recorded? And if he wrote before them, why did they omit so much that he had related of incident and circumstance? St. Luke has given long narratives unknown to St. Matthew and St. Mark. What was his authority for these? and why are they peculiar to him? These are questions to which replies may be suggested, but none of them can be regarded as sufficient or satisfactory.

It must be borne in mind that any four persons who undertook to give an account of a certain series of events in the life of any individual would undoubtedly present many differences of detail, however in the main they all might agree. And most certainly in one respect they would unconsciously and inevitably differ, and that would be in the general impression they would convey as to the character of the person whose life they depicted. Now, nothing is more certain than that the character of the person depicted by the synoptical evangelists is identically the same. And even in the case of St. John, the impression conveyed by his narrative

is essentially the same with that produced by the synoptics. The Christ of St. John is not in character and person to be distinguished from the Christ of the other three evangelists, notwithstanding the conspicuous differences that characterize his Gospel. This, then, is an additional feature that has to be accounted for.

If, however, the several evangelists did not borrow from each other, it has been supposed that they borrowed from a common source. It has especially been conjectured that there was an original St. Matthew or St. Mark. All we can say is that no vestige or trace of such a document has ever been discovered elsewhere than in the brain of the critic. Of course, it is open to us to frame any conjectures we please, and the more so in proportion to the non-existence of the evidence. For conjectural purposes, *nowhere* furnishes a yet wider and more promising basis than *anywhere*, because less open to the correction of fact.

But let us suppose that such an original mine of reference did at the first exist, whatever may have been its origin. Then, seeing that on the hypothesis each of our four Gospels was directly indebted to this source, it is clear that each evangelist must have highly esteemed it. How, then, did it come to pass that they did not combine in their efforts to preserve this original source intact, instead of agreeing together to supersede it by their several efforts? Or how is it that some one of the four did not use his efforts in this direction with the object of proving his own Gospel preferable to theirs of whom he was apparently a rival competitor. In the absence of any particle of evidence to show the existence of any such document, it is surely lawful and reasonable to take note of the actual difficulties which would undoubtedly have resulted from its existence. Had such a common document ever existed, it is not one whit less difficult to account for the way in which the several evangelists selected that which each has preserved and left that which his fellows preferred, and possibly rejected much which no one has cared to take. But, after all, the antecedent difficulty of the entire and absolute disappearance of the supposed document, when it would plainly have been to the general advantage to be able to appeal to it against any or all of the four, is the difficulty that requires to be explained.

If, therefore, it is not a promising thing to postulate a common original document, which has wholly and absolutely perished, and left no record of its existence, what are we to say to the other hypothesis which conceives of a vast original mass of oral teaching as the actual source on which the evangelists were dependent for their several narratives? If the written document did not exist, is it possible to conceive

of any such oral fund as being available, or, indeed, as having any existence?

It is a well-known fact that the several differences in the Gospels are to be found chiefly in the narrative parts. There is a remarkable identity in the sayings and discourses of our Lord. Now it would seem to be exactly these discourses that it would be so difficult to preserve in a merely oral form. Take for example the Sermon on the Mount, though it is peculiar to St. Matthew, how is it conceivable that that should have been preserved by oral transmission? We must bear in mind that in all probability some of our Gospels existed before the year sixty; that is to say, thirty years after the death of Christ. But let us try to estimate the difficulty of reproducing any speech, however striking and remarkable, three or four years after it was uttered, and how inconceivable the effect of reproducing such a discourse as the Sermon on the Mount immediately after it was delivered, or five years afterwards, or ten or twenty years afterwards! It is wholly inconceivable. But the idea that this discourse was preserved from any notes or report taken at the time, is even more preposterous. And yet here, in the nineteenth century after Christ, is the very discourse Christ delivered to His disciples when sitting on the mount, and that, be it remembered, some time before, as it would seem, the disciple to whom we are indebted for it was called to be a disciple. Now in the face of these facts we are driven to conclude either that the discourse is more or less the ideal composition of the Apostle based on his recollection of various discourses of his Master, or that otherwise it is the result of a process which we cannot understand, or account for, or explain. And the more manifestly is this the case, according as we are at liberty to suppose that we have, in the Sermon on the Mount, the actual words of our blessed Lord. How many of us at the present time could repeat this discourse verbatim, or write it out correctly, though we have heard it and read it many hundreds and perhaps thousands of times? To suppose that among the listeners at the time there was present anyone who could have remembered it, and that St. Matthew recorded it on his authority, is to suppose that which, to say the least, is barely conceivable, if it is not wholly impossible. But if we are warranted in saying so of the Sermon on the Mount, how much more certainly must we say the same of the long and transcendental discourses in St. John! By common consent his Gospel is the latest of all. To place its composition fifty years after the death of Christ, would be commonly thought to place it too early. What then are we to say of these discourses? There is a strong tendency in the present day to

regard them as highly idealized, and to ascribe them without hesitation to the invention of St. John, to conceive of them as personal reminiscences, but as reminiscences which have been cherished so long in the mind of the writer as to have absorbed the colour of his mind and the flavour of his thought. Personally I cannot adopt this view. I believe it is perilous to do so; for in that case we should be believers in John rather than in Jesus, and we could not be sure that we had not got hold of St. John when we supposed that we were retaining Jesus. Personally, I believe, we may implicitly trust the conversation with Nicodemus, and the Paschal discourses, and the last prayer of the great High Priest; but then, how about the natural, matter-of-fact means by which the memory of those sublime discourses was preserved? And yet, if these various discourses are genuine, and not imaginary or invented, *ecce miraculum!* without any shadow of doubt, they absolutely defy explanation. The longer we suppose them to have lain dormant in the Apostle's mind, the more difficult it is to understand their production, and yet, if they were from the first committed to writing, why have we not earlier evidence of the existence of this Gospel, or of the source from which it was derived?

It is, I conceive, with the discourses of our Lord that the chief difficulty lies, and it is with respect to the discourses as given in the synoptics that we discover an almost identical sameness. If there is a difficulty in supposing one to have remembered them, how much more difficulty is there in supposing three to have done so? And on the hypothesis of a common oral fund, how much is that difficulty enhanced by supposing that all were agreed as to the recollection of them. I can neither imagine any original written document nor any common oral tradition which can have formed the basis of such a document.

Then with regard to the narrative portions of the Gospels, we know how exceedingly difficult it is to obtain a consistent account of any important transaction in which three independent persons were concerned. With no desire to exaggerate or to misrepresent, is it not certain that the accounts of any three persons concerned in it would materially differ, at all events in form? But take the narrative of the feeding of the five thousand, of which we have four independent accounts, and mark their consistency and their unanimity, which in this case is not the least conspicuous in the matter of the estimated number of the five thousand. And yet here each evangelist has contributed his own individual quota to the general narrative, which at once shows his independence and his originality. It is not possible to call in question a narrative so circumstan-

tially related and so individually and independently vouched for. And yet how stupendous the issue with which that narrative is fraught!

There is, of course, nothing remarkable in the fact that one evangelist should relate incidents or discourses omitted by another, but a real difficulty seems to arise where two or more evangelists give different versions of what may appear to be the same story. And there are several instances of this kind; for example, the history of the temptation as recorded by St. Matthew and St. Luke, the miraculous draught of fishes as told by St. Luke and St. John, the cleansing of the temple as related by St. John and the other evangelists, the case of the demoniac and of the blind man at Jericho, the anointing of the Saviour's feet, and other similar cases. And with regard to these we must bear in mind that similarity is not identity. There was a general similarity between the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand, and yet the same evangelist, and he the most minute and graphic of all, has recorded both. We are compelled to believe, therefore, that they were different occurrences. Again, if St. John has recorded a cleansing of the temple at a passover not mentioned by anyone else, it is arbitrary to infer that the evangelist has confounded two different occasions, separated by an interval of three years. Once more, if St. Luke, as early as his fifth chapter, has recorded a miraculous draught of fishes, it is wholly gratuitous to assume that one who professes to have written "in order," should have made such a mistake as to confound this event with one that happened after the resurrection, and yet there is undeniably a general similarity in the incidents. The inference, therefore, which, as I conceive, we are bound to draw, is that we may expect and must be prepared to find several instances of repetition in our Lord's life, and more especially may this be the case with regard to His miracles. We are given by all the evangelists to understand that multitudes of cures were wrought by Him. The five and twenty or thirty cases which have been recorded constitute undoubtedly but a very small portion of those which were actually wrought. There will, therefore, be nothing unreasonable in supposing that miracles which have certain broad features in common, may, after all, not be the same, and that if in the context we can discover differences, we shall do some credit to the evangelists' accuracy and fidelity if we decide that the incidents were different.

For instance, St. Matthew records the healing of a leper immediately upon our Lord's coming down from the mountain. St. Mark and St. Luke tell us of a like case when he was in a certain city. Now, as a leper, except under special circum-

stances, would not be found in a city, and in St. Matthew there is no mention of any city, but only of a mountain, it is possible that we may be gainers to a considerable extent if we infer that we have in them the record of another case of cure of leprosy different altogether from St. Matthew's, more especially as we know that many lepers were healed by Christ in the course of his ministry. If, again, St. Luke's account of the anointing our Lord's feet is to be identified with that in St. Matthew, we can only say that any historian who should so misplace an event in the narrative of the life of his subject would be guilty of a great delinquency, which would disqualify him from being a trustworthy biographer, if it did not altogether ruin his credit as an evangelist.

I take it, therefore, that we must decide upon the amount of credit with which we shall approach the study of the Gospels; we must determine whether they are substantially true, or whether they may be trusted circumstantially. Those who advocate their substantial truthfulness are undisturbed by any such discrepancies as those to which I have alluded, only then in that case it may be doubted whether they do not open the door to very grave difficulties in the apparently conflicting details, *e.g.*, of the crucifixion and the resurrection. In such a matter as that of the resurrection, it would seem more than ever desirable that we should have a trustworthy and consistent narrative, whereas it is precisely here that the adversary is most triumphant, and ready to affirm that it is impossible to reconcile the several accounts of the resurrection. We may well ask, then, what sort of substantial truth can that be in a narrative of which the details are hopelessly irreconcilable? Must not the four witnesses have been too confused and vague in their observation or their recollection to make their accounts of any value? Is it possible that we can implicitly rely upon their substantial truth, if their narratives are circumstantially so conflicting? But is not the resurrection the very point of all others in which their statements, if true at all, must be true to the letter, for otherwise will not the fact of the resurrection be in danger of becoming as insubstantial as a vision, or a dream, or an hallucination? I think, therefore, we cannot be satisfied with holding that the narrative of the evangelists is not more than substantially true. And certainly the claim made by St. Luke in his preface would seem to warrant us in expecting more than this. He tells us that he had taken pains to ascertain the truth of the things about which he writes, and he implies that the person for whose benefit he primarily writes may rely upon the certainty of his narrative. If, then, this is the case, we may

expect to find him not only substantially true, but also circumstantially accurate.

And certainly when we examine a narrative like that of St. Mark, we are led to believe that he has striven to be most careful as to his detail. The minute and delicate touches which characterize his Gospel show that he was habitually given to precise and accurate observation, and we do him wrong to suppose that he was regardless of the sequence of events and indifferent to the requirements of chronology. One link of the very opposite kind he alone has supplied us with in recording that our Lord began His ministry with distinct reference to time, whatever the note of time may have been from which he computed when he said, "The time is fulfilled." This may either be understood vaguely with reference to the general fitness of things, or it may have, as it probably has, a far more exact reference to the completion of the prophetic seventy weeks of Daniel. This is rendered the more probable from its immediate connection with the words "the kingdom of God is at hand," a phrase which derives its full significance from, and can only be understood as referring to, Daniel's prophecy of the fifth or final kingdom.

If, then, it is unwise and unfair to overlook these slight indications in the evangelists of a circumstantial particularity in their narrative, it is not a very rash inference if we give them credit for minute and intentional accuracy, and on the supposition that each evangelist adhered to the true sequence of events, we arrive at certain principles in the study of them which may guide us to important results. The choice apparently will be between doing this, and supposing the four writers to have been entirely indifferent to the order of time, and to have adopted some other order which must be more open to conjecture, and concerning which we cannot be certain that we have discovered it. Moreover, that there is a certain order of events which not only each evangelist has followed, but that all alike have followed in common, admits of no reasonable doubt; for example, each evangelist does not scruple to say that such and such an event happened after such and such another. These notes of time perhaps are more definite and distinct in St. John, but we shall see that they can equally be discovered in the synoptics. For instance, St. John makes mention of a passover and a visit paid to Jerusalem which no one else alludes to, but which both St. Matthew and St. Mark must have been aware of and had in mind, though they have not recorded it. The incidents of this visit are given by St. John alone; one would suppose that he must have accompanied his Master on that occasion, as he probably

would have done. But after this passover, and the events which followed it, such as the discourse with Nicodemus, and the like, we are distinctly told that "John was not yet cast into prison." We read, however, as early as Mark i. 4, and Matt. iv. 12 in the Authorised Version, that "John was put in prison," and "cast into prison," which greatly disturbs the order of events as given by St. John. In the Revised Version, as also in the Authorised margin of St. Matthew, the true rendering is preserved, viz., that "John was delivered up." Now, delivering up and putting in prison are two different things, and it is hardly likely that a violent imprisonment like that of John by Herod would be spoken of as a delivering up; much more likely is it that in consequence of the priests and Levites continuing to inquire into the action of John the Baptist, in the way the fourth Gospel tells us, he was delivered up either by Herod, or more probably by the treacherous among his own followers, to the ecclesiastical authorities at Jerusalem, and that they "did unto him whatsoever they listed," which, however, was altogether distinct from the vindictive punishment of him by Herod. It is the scribes of whom our Lord is speaking in this place, and He significantly adds, "Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them," *i.e.*, the scribes. Matt. xvii. 12, Mark ix. 13.

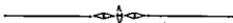
We see, then, according to St. John that there was a passover kept by Jesus at Jerusalem with other attendant circumstances, and a period very probably of some months, during which Jesus tarried in Judea while John was baptizing at Ænon, near to Salim, while John was not yet cast into prison. Also it is perfectly plain that, if we may trust St. John, not only was the passover in chap. ii. distinct from the last, at which Christ suffered, but also that another passover occurred about the time of the feeding of the five thousand; and probably another, to which allusion is made in chap. v. 1. Thus St. John notices four passovers. Can we trust him, or must we do violence to his narrative to bring it into harmony with the others?

Now it is remarkable that though the synoptical Gospels only make mention of one passover, they distinctly imply the existence of others, and this is very important. For instance, we have the fourfold narrative of the feeding of the five thousand. This we know from St. John was just before a passover. Therefore, if he is to be relied upon, the three evangelists, no less than he does, imply the occurrence of, at all events, two passovers during our Lord's ministry. But they imply also a third, for all three of them relate an occasion on which Jesus was walking with His disciples through the corn-fields, and the corn was in ear; this, therefore, would be at the passover

season. But between this occasion and the feeding of the five thousand there occurred sundry miracles, a conspiracy of the Pharisees and the Herodians to destroy Him, the delivery of all the parables preserved in St. Matt. xiii., the ordination of the twelve Apostles, and the death of John the Baptist—events amply sufficient to occupy a year. Therefore we conclude that the synoptical Gospels imply, at all events, three passovers during our Lord's ministry. St. John alone tells us of the fourth, or, rather, of the first. But now when we turn to St. Luke, at a period subsequent to the feeding of the five thousand, that is, the third passover, we find our Lord saying in a parable, "These three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree and find none. Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" And the dresser of the vineyard replies, "Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it and dung it; and if it bear fruit well, and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down." Can anything be more evident than that, from these considerations, the three first Gospels imply a ministry of at least three years, which St. John confirms by indications of part of a fourth, and it is only when the Gospels are read carelessly, as if the writers meant no more by what they said than their careless readers understand them to mean, that they give any countenance to a one year's ministry, or even seem to be in conflict with St. John.

(To be continued.)

STANLEY LEATHES, D.D.



ART. II.—THE SERVANT OF CHRIST.

NO. XI.—CONVERSION.

I WISH to discuss the question whether all conversions must be sudden: whether we must be able to register their day and hour.

No such doctrine is to be found in the Bible. It is best to go at once to the Fountain of all Wisdom, our Divine Lord Himself, and He will set the question at rest for ever. No, He says: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." You may be the wisest man alive. You may be the most learned theologian. You may be the most touching and eloquent preacher. But the Spirit of God will beat you. You will no more be able to measure His coming or His going, or say when He began to influence such a person, or where His influence came from, or how it worked, than you can say