

## Harmony of the Gospels: a Study for the East and for the West.

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A YEAR or so ago I had the opportunity of discussing in the pages of the *CHURCHMAN* the question of applying, adapting, or altering rules laid down for Christian conduct fifty years ago, in such matters, for example, as recreation, and in the persons of such people as Chinese Christians.

I ask permission now to propound another question—namely, the right way in which to guide and teach, or to leave wholly to themselves, Christian seekers after truth, in such matters as the inspiration of the Bible, its composition and structure, its date and authorship, and, in this article particularly, the alleged contradictions and discrepancies in the Gospel story.

Are we to lead our pupils or our intelligent scholarly friends through those mazes of doubt and controversy which have marked the Church's progress, or which have so retarded that progress? Must we suggest those doubts to our friends which perhaps we can with greater honesty and wisdom assure them have been laid? Shall we present before them difficulties which sober and profound scholars have, we may reasonably believe, removed? Shall we lead them straight into thickets or labyrinths from which the Church of Christ has emerged, or from which it is on the point of escaping?

Part of my missionary duty consists in assembling and presiding over monthly reunions of Chinese catechists and evangelists within a certain area—all, in fact, who are not too far off in the distant mountains or remote stations to come up to the place of meeting, namely, Ningpo, in the Diocese of Mid-China. Amongst other work, the catechists write for me short essays or sermons on a set subject given the month before. I propose shortly to give them the subject of the fourfold account in the Gospels of the events connected with the Death and Resurrection of our Lord. Do they harmonize, or are there

serious discrepancies? And I ask myself (a question which has suggested the writing of this article) whether I am bound to pass on to these men that which I have just read in a book quite recently published in England (the name I purposely withhold, not wishing to disparage the great interest and ability of the book). The author first of all propounds the very interesting and not improbable theory that the first Christian accounts of the circumstances connected with the death of Christ must be presumed to have been *written* in the year when the Lord died and rose; and on these accounts, the author seems to imply, the present Gospels were founded. "But," he proceeds, "the objection will doubtless be made at once, 'If that be so, how can you account for such facts as that Mark says the Crucifixion was completed (*sic*) by the third hour of the day (9 a.m. according to our modern reckoning of time), while John says that the *sentence* only was passed about the sixth hour—*i.e.*, noon?' The reply is obvious. The difference dates from the event itself. Had evidence been collected that night or the next morning, the two diverse accounts, already hopelessly discrepant and contradictory, would have been observed and recorded." Presumably, if I do not wholly misunderstand the argument, they would have been corrected also.

But we have an instance here, perhaps an extreme one, of the unfairness of prejudging the whole case by this careless use of the word "discrepancy." It most literally begs the question. And the writer calmly explains the "hopeless" confusion thus: One opinion (St. Mark's or his informants') was *careless*, and given by one "unaccustomed to note the lapse of time or define it accurately in thought or speech." The other (St. John's) is supposed to be the opinion of "an exceptional man" who through a certain idiosyncrasy was observant and careful as to the lapse of time (see, *e.g.*, St. John's tenth hour, i. 39; sixth hour, iv. 6; seventh hour, iv. 52).

Now, it is difficult to imagine a more imperfect and *inexact* statement of the case than in this passage which I have quoted. The fact so probable, and so clearly stated in early ecclesi-

astical history, of St. John writing his Gospel sixty years later than these supposed earliest records, is not even hinted at. And the probable, and to all scholars the most familiar, suggestion (see especially Westcott's dissertation) that St. John used the Roman and not the Jewish method of computing time is ignored. The very passages where St. John is represented as so accurately noting time are rendered so much easier by this method of reckoning, for now the disciples spend with the Lord a long day (10 a.m. till sunset) instead of only one hour, if the tenth hour was 4 p.m.; and the woman of Samaria draws water at 6 p.m., a more usual hour than at noon; and the fever left the child at 7 p.m., and not at 1 p.m.

Now I ask myself whether this is a fair specimen of criticism. If it be so, I am *not* warranted in transmitting such groundless charges of hopelessly discordant and contradictory narratives.

I am well aware, from long use of his commentaries, that Dean Alford, in his eager repudiation of unworthy doubt, treats with almost rough contempt the "harmonists" and all their works. His argument—one very commonly adopted by Christian apologists—is that in courts of law a general circumstantial agreement of witnesses is held sufficient, and is not considered inconsistent with variations in particulars. This is so because it is recognized that, notably when there is much stir and circumstance and shifting of scene in a plot or tragedy, witnesses may observe from different points and sides, and their avenue of view may be momentarily obscured, or excitement may affect their memories. Yet, if in the main fact they agree, the evidence is accepted and decides the case. So Christ died and rose. All four Gospels testify to this, and all Christendom, on the evidence of this fourfold witness, believes. But at what precise hour, and seen in what order and by whom—on these points the witnesses (so the argument runs) agree to differ, and their main testimony is not shaken thereby.

It has always seemed to me that this contempt for minute harmonizing, and this argument from the practice of common law,

should appeal indeed to an unbeliever, or to a candid critic and inquirer, but that for a believer in inspiration, and in the truth of God recorded and transmitted by inspired writers, the argument is not wholly satisfactory. Indeed, even the candid critic, if he yields to this argument and accepts the testimony of witnesses evidently honest, though apparently contradictory in detail, will be brought round as by circular reasoning to the point of departure, and will be forced to believe in harmonizing. For he will argue, as at the present day shrewd and strong Chinese intellects do argue, that if he can accept as true the evidence of witnesses who, though differing in details, yet agree in essentials ("great in oneness, small in differences," as the Chinese idiom has it), then he must believe the Gospel story, with all its narrative of Divine and supernatural events and consequent doctrines, to be essentially true. But the more he believes in the essential truth of the Gospel story, the more likely is he to argue backwards to the point that the Spirit of Truth, who was to bring all things to remembrance and guide into all truth, would not allow the inspired writers to be inaccurate even in the smallest details of events of such significance as the Crucifixion and Resurrection of our Lord. And thus, though persuaded at first by documents which he supposed might (in certain small details) be inharmonious, he is eventually led to consider the possibility of their being harmonized. And am I not right in encouraging my Chinese friends to do this? Hopelessly discrepant and contradictory statements mean, in plain English, inaccuracy and mistake; and that is far too grave a flaw to be thus tolerated and alleged against documents which we accept as our guides and teachers, because they cannot deceive us or disappoint, for they are inspired. Imagined "inaccuracy of detail" will often be found to arise from grave inaccuracy in study. "I do not require, and I do not think the Church wants, an inerrant, infallible book," said a candid young student to me not long ago. "If I did, I should consider the solution you offer of the discrepancies, contradictions, and misstatements, which I seem to find there, perfectly satisfactory." My friend did not

go on to explain the strangely illogical and inconsequential conclusion, that the explanations, satisfactory in themselves, ceased to be worthy of notice, because they were not wanted in his present attitude of mind. It will be a serious thing indeed if the West abandons what may be called, perhaps, the exact science of the Christian faith, and thinks she can live, and grow, and walk without an infallible lamp to her feet and lantern to her path. The East, the once-dreaming East, in her awakening thirst for knowledge, does desire, as an undoubted necessity, a guide and teacher which will make no mistakes.

Shall I be lagging behind these enlightened times, and appear as a mere waster of time, if I write down what, through long years of difficulty and doubt, has helped me, and what I propose to suggest to my Chinese friends ?

I. First observe the harmony of the four Gospels as to the hour of the Crucifixion—the point which the author on whom I have animadverted asserts to be a point of discrepancy.

(a) The time of the trial before Pilate is thus given :

St. Matthew xxvii. 1 : "When morning was come."

St. Mark xv. 1 : "Straightway in the morning."

St. Luke xxiii. 1 : "The whole company of them rose up and brought Him before Pilate."

St. John xix. 13, 14 : "Pilate . . . brought Jesus out. . . . It was about the sixth hour."

This last statement of time is, then, the general point of time, "*about* the sixth hour," given by this accurate and minute observer ; and it completely harmonizes with "the morning" of St. Matthew and St. Mark (St. Luke names no time), for St. John's sixth hour was probably 6 a.m.

(b) The time of the Crucifixion.

St. Matthew xxvii. 35 : "When they had crucified Him" (no hour marked); xxvii. 45 : "From the sixth hour [noon] there was darkness . . . until the ninth hour" (3 p.m.), a point of time quite in harmony with the idea that noon was the *middle* of the awful time of Crucifixion.

St. Mark xv. 25 : "It was the third hour [9 a.m.], and they

crucified Him." This is the only precise time for the act of crucifixion given in the Gospels.

St. Luke xxiii. 44: "It was now about the sixth hour" (noon). This mark of time comes *after* the narrative of events and words since the Crucifixion began, and coincides with the idea that noon was about the middle point in the time occupied by the Crucifixion.

St. John xix. 18: "Where they crucified Him." And this eyewitness and careful loving observer gives no note of time, only he mentions that "from that hour" he led the Blessed Mother away, either just before the darkness or immediately after, and before the Lord's death.

There is, therefore, complete harmony here. St. Mark gives the exact hour of the act of crucifixion. St. Matthew and St. Luke speak of three hours specially out of the six. And St. John in no sense and by no word "hopelessly contradicts" or discredits the others.

II. The Resurrection of the Lord is thus described by note of time and sequence of events:

(a) The time.

St. Matthew xxviii. 1: "Late on the Sabbath day, as it began to dawn"—*τῇ ἐπιφωσκούσῃ εἰς μίαν σαββάτων.*

St. Mark xvi. 2: "Very early on the first day of the week, they come to the tomb when the sun was risen"—*λίαν πρωὶ . . . ἀνατείλαντος τοῦ ἡλίου.*

St. Luke xxiv. 1: "At early dawn"—*ἄρθρου βαθέως.*

St. John xx. 1: "Early, while it was yet dark"—*πρωῖ, σκοτίας ἔτι οὔσης.*

Here the differences vanish like the dark before the dawn, if we notice (1) that there were probably two bands of loving women coming to weep over and care for the Dead—one party starting from houses further off than the other. The nearer, then, would start and arrive at early dawn; those further off would arrive still early, but at sunrise. (2) If Mary Magdalene did go first, alone, then her coming was as St. John says (and he *alone* says this), "when it was yet dark." Notice also that

St. Mark, more accurate than our author would admit, alone names the hour of the Lord's rising ( $\pi\rho\omega\lambda$ , xvi. 9).

(b) The persons and their attitude.

St. Matthew xxviii. 1, 8: "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary." "They departed . . . with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word."

St. Mark xvi. 1, 8: "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome." "They went out and fled . . . trembling and astonishment had come upon them . . . they were afraid."

[The "not saying anything to any man" was on the road till they met the Lord, not when they met the Apostles.]

St. Luke xxiv. 5, 10, 11: "Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women." "As they were affrighted" [The Apostles] "disbelieved them."

St. John xx. 1, 18: "Mary Magdalene . . . seeth the stone taken away . . . runneth . . . and cometh to Simon Peter . . . was standing without at the tomb weeping. . . . Rabboni . . . cometh and telleth the disciples."

[The prominent mention of Mary Magdalene in each narrative seems, perhaps, to imply that the synoptists as well as St. John knew well the peculiar circumstances of her first visit to the tomb, but, as I notice below, purposely deferred the narration.]

(c) The near sequel.

St. Matthew (xxviii.), after noting the effect of the Resurrection on the guards and on the chief priests, passes at once to the farewell meeting, and the commission before the Ascension; and the chapter has, for me, the appearance of being fragmentary and unfinished, perhaps through some sudden cause.

St. Mark (xvi. 9, 12) speaks briefly of the great narratives fully given by St. John and St. Luke: "He appeared first to Mary Magdalene . . . He was manifested in another form unto two of them, as they walked, on their way into the country. And they went away and told it unto the rest."

St. Luke (xxiv. 13-34) relates the walk to Emmaus and the return. "The Lord . . . hath appeared to Simon."

St. John xx. 19 (A.V.): "Then the same day at evening . . . came Jesus."

In these four narratives (which are supposed by commentators in many cases, as well as by sceptics, not to admit of harmonizing, without further knowledge of missing links of evidence and event) observe—

1. That no one of the Evangelists contradicts another. St. John does not say that no one but Mary Magdalene was at the sepulchre, or that she went thither only once. It seems probable that she was there *thrice*; first alone, or with the other Mary (she perhaps going on to meet the other women, and hasten their coming, while Mary Magdalene went to see the tomb alone). The city gate is so near to the sepulchre, "nigh at hand," that there was time, before the other women came and the sun was up, for her hurried run to John's house, perhaps just inside the gate; then back again, following Peter and John; tarrying when they had left; hearing, seeing, adoring the Lord; and then leaving just in time to meet and join the other women, and with them to approach the tomb, talking to them, assuring them of the truth which the angels thereupon confirmed, but which they were too agitated and frightened to believe; till presently, Mary running with them and speaking to them of their unbelief, "in the open way," they meet the Lord, and the "terror and fright" of St. Mark is turned to the "fear and great joy" of St. Matthew.

2. Notice, further, the undesigned coincidences besides those noted above in St. Mark's adumbration of St. Luke and St. John's fuller stories. Undesigned but "innocent" discrepancies too many modern commentators seem to think it right to discover. But the elder generation was wise, and not a whit the less scholarly. Professor Blunt, in his almost forgotten book on this subject, points out the coincidences, which are all the more striking because so undesigned. St. Mark, doubtless from St. Peter's lips, records the individual message of the

Resurrection to Peter: "Tell His disciples and Peter." And St. Luke tells us (xxiv. 11) that, though the Apostles treated the message of the women as *λῆρος*, "idle talk," yet Peter "arose and ran unto the tomb." This verse is placed by Dr. Nestle within double brackets, as considered by a majority of critical editors to be a very early interpolation. Was it possibly part of that earliest draft Gospel of which our above-named author speaks? The Revisers have, however, retained the verse in the text, and it suggests the most interesting thought that this is not an imperfect sketch of St. John's full narrative, as some would assert—Peter and John together running to the tomb, as St. John describes—but that it rather relates a *second visit of Peter alone*. He had gone first with his beloved friend. He returned still in doubt, though faith, like the dawn, had risen in St. John's soul. He, perhaps, joined now the other Apostles, and was sitting with them when the women entered; and one gave Peter the angel's special message to himself. Could *this* be an idle tale? He at any rate has reason to go and see. He runs again; again he finds nothing but mystery; and he departs wondering. And lo! is it here, and is it now, close to the open tomb as with Mary, that he meets the Lord? "He hath appeared to Simon," says St. Luke further down in his twenty-fourth chapter.

3. St. Mark's sixteenth chapter, which seems a measured denunciation of unbelief and hardness of the disciples' hearts, throws light on more points than one in this discussion. St. Mark seems to draw our attention to the fact of the Resurrection, from this very sombre feature of the disciples' doubt. He brands it as unbelief, not as mere ignorance; and he implies that this unbelief was so stubborn, and their inexpectancy of the rising so complete, that nothing but actual sight and knowledge would have led them to believe the fact. St. Peter's fall, so familiar from the Apostle's own lips, weighed, perhaps, on the Evangelist's mind, and perhaps his own weakness also—for he may have been the young man (xiv. 51) who, roused by the sudden tumult, rushed out with the design of standing by the

Lord, and then, terrified by the first act of violence, fled ignominiously—the same Mark who later, with toil and danger in front and his home behind, “departed from them and went not with them to the work.” So St. Mark reminds us that there was unbelief for a while even in that wonderful upper room on Easter evening. “Yes!” the assembled Apostles and others say to the two just in after their swift walk from Emmaus, “Yes! the Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon!” But they seem to imply that they cannot believe that He had appeared to the two, seven miles away, to those who had left them all in sadness and unbelief. Then the Lord came, and “they were glad.”

So that, take those closing verses of St. Mark as you may—if they be accepted as original (and this Dr. Salmon has, I must think, given us to believe beyond reasonable doubt)—we have St. Mark’s striking corroboration of both St. Luke and St. John; or if the passage be regarded as a later addition, this forms a corroboration of the theory (advanced below) as to the designedly deferred mention of Mary Magdalene.

I do not pursue the subject further, or notice at length the narratives of the Ascension—St. Matthew alluding to it, or presupposing it, in his twenty-fifth and twenty-eighth chapters; St. Mark and St. Luke (St. Luke in the Acts as well) narrating it fully; and St. John giving the clearest possible prophecies of it and allusions to it in his Gospel. But I conclude from this examination and survey that neither honest criticism nor sound scholarship forbids our encouraging this fast-awakening East to study the Bible, expecting to find it accurate, and not to entertain the mistaken idea that genius and scholarship and well-developed intelligence are chiefly displayed when engaged in convicting the great Bible of error.

This confidence of faith and this outspoken expectation will not, indeed, ignore the duty of honest and thorough examination of the Sacred Writings. Only the time, surely, has come when we may say confidently to both Western and Eastern students and inquirers: “The word of the Lord has been tried; it has been weighed in the balances, and it is

not found wanting. For ever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven."

And those earlier suggestions of possible harmony or explanation which our fathers considered may well help us now. For instance, the omission by the Synoptists of St. John's full narrative of Mary Magdalene's unique and supreme joy and privilege—the first to see the risen Lord, and the first missionary of the Resurrection; the silence, also, of the three Evangelists as to the name of the Malchus whom Peter in his reckless zeal had wished to slay. Both the silence and the full utterance were probably designedly adopted and so timed that the loving woman and the loving "converted" Apostle should have passed for ever beyond these earthly voices of flattery or envy or detraction, before these histories in which they figured were, in all their details, written. This consideration of Mary Magdalene being still alive may possibly account in some measure for St. Paul's omission of her name before that of Cephas in his full and significant list of the eyewitnesses (1 Cor. xv.), though it is true that (if the verses in St. Mark are, as I assume, original) there is still the mention of Mary by St. Mark during her lifetime; but, perhaps, by her own hand it is added "out of whom He cast seven devils."

What I desire to emphasize in these pages, and also in the hearing of my friends and fellow Bible-students among the Chinese, is (and this principle affects the whole area of Biblical criticism) that faith in the accuracy—I had almost said the inerrancy—of the sacred books is becoming more and more satisfying to reason and to logic and to scholarship, than the wearying and unsatisfying doubts as to the supreme truth of the Bible. And in the special subject now before me, I contend that it is much more reasonable to believe that the four narratives of the Gospel are really in harmony than that they are hopelessly discrepant; and with this principle to guide us, imagination in filling up *lacunæ* and supplying suggestive links ceases to be vain fancy, and becomes the keen eye of reverent faith.