

St. Matthew and the First Gospel.

II.

[We much regret to state that since these papers on St. Matthew and the First Gospel were written, the writer, the Rev. Arthur Carr, has passed away. His death is a great loss to Biblical Scholarship.]

WE now come to a very important and much disputed point in the history of the transmission of the Gospels, namely, the earliest actual evidence of a written gospel. That evidence is found in the well-known passage of Eusebius, *H.E.*, iii. 39. Eusebius then quotes the words of Papias. As Papias is known to have conversed with those who had seen the Lord, or at least with those who had known Apostles, his testimony is very important. He says: "So then Matthew composed the discourses or oracles or sayings (*δὰ λόγια*) in Hebrew, and every one interpreted them as he could." Much and often as these words have been discussed, their meaning is still uncertain. Papias, whose date may be stated approximately as A.D. 120, is writing in Greek to Christians, whose language was Greek, and who had presumably a Greek Gospel or Gospels in their hands. As there is evidence of quotation from St. Matthew's Gospel by Clement of Rome (c. A.D. 95) it is allowable to say that they were acquainted with that Gospel in Greek, and that they knew nothing of the Hebrew Gospel of St. Matthew. Papias then informs his readers that originally Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew: the definite article before *λόγια* confirms this view. He says in effect, the well-known Gospel which you have in Greek was originally written in Hebrew (i.e. in Aramaic). He then adds words which have been variously explained. "Every one interpreted them as he could." Why does Papias say that? He says it to explain the various Greek versions all purporting to be derived from St. Matthew's Hebrew or Aramaic Gospel, some of which would be faithful interpretations, others indifferent and faulty owing to the interpreter's ignorance of Hebrew or Aramaic. Still, it must be remembered that these versions would exist in large numbers, and would supply sources for other Gospels in addition to the notes and reminiscences of the Apostolic teaching (*διδασχί*) referred to in Acts ii. 42. Further evidence as to the existence of a "Hebrew" Gospel of St. Matthew is given by Irenaeus

(III, i. 1) in the second century,¹ who says: "Matthew published his Gospel writing among the Hebrews in their own language, while Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel at Rome, and founding the Church. After their departure (*ἔξοδον*) Mark, the disciple and interpreter of St. Peter, having committed to writing the things proclaimed by Peter, transmitted them to us."²

It is of course possible that what Papias means by "the Oracles" is a collection of Our Lord's discourses with only so much narrative introduced as was necessary to explain the occasion of delivery. On the other hand, Papias applies the same word to the Gospel of St. Mark, and he uses the expression "oracles of the Lord" (*τὰ λόγια του κυρίου*) in the title of his own work, which we know to have contained facts as well as discourses.

Possibly the imperfection of the Greek versions may have been among the causes which induced St. Matthew to put forth his own version of the Gospel in Greek.

Apart from this, however, it is quite certain that a demand would arise among Greek-speaking converts to Christianity for a gospel in their own language, carrying with it the authority of an Apostle and witness of Jesus Christ. And here it is necessary to observe that such a gospel need not have been a translation.³ St. Matthew, as noted above, like many of his fellow-countrymen at that epoch, may well have been able to converse and write with equal facility in Greek and Aramaic.

Partly owing to the complete alienation of Church and Synagogue which seems to have taken effect after A.D. 135, the Greek language came to be at that time a special instrument for the transmission of Christian truth and ministry.⁴

At a very early age the four Canonical Gospels in Greek held the distinctive position which they have occupied ever since, and from the first the authenticity and canonical order of each has been practically undisputed until modern times.

Irenaeus gives the order as we have it: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. Clement of Alexandria, c. 200 A.D., says: "The two Gospels

¹ See also Eusebius, *H.E.*, vi. 25; III, xxiv. 6; V, x. 3.

² This is inconsistent with the very early date assigned to Mark by Archdeacon Allen, viz., A.D. 45.

³ One of the arguments against the authenticity of St. Matthew's Gospel being that it bears no mark of being translated.

⁴ *Expositor*, July, 1916, p. 13.

which contain the genealogies were written before the others." The origin of the second Gospel is described as follows: "Peter having preached the word at Rome . . . his hearers prayed Mark, who remembered the things spoken by him to put them in writing, and after he had composed the gospel to deliver it to those who had asked it of him."

In the *Didachè* (c. 100 A.D.) St. Matthew and St. Luke alone are quoted, and not St. Mark. In the Ignatian letters again St. Matthew, St. Luke and St. John are quoted, not St. Mark.

Origen also (Eus., *H.E.* vi. 25) gives the priority to the Gospel according to St. Matthew with great definiteness. St. Mark he ranks second in order of time, composed under the guidance of St. Peter. This testimony is the more striking, as it would be natural to ascribe the priority to a gospel which carried with it the authority of the Chief of the Apostles. It may also be noted here that scholars like Clement of Alexandria and Origen had before them the same facts of likeness and difference in the first and second Gospels, but no doubt appears to have risen in regard to the priority of St. Matthew.

It is not to be supposed that during that long period the Canonical books as we now have them were unchallenged; the authorship, for instance, of the Hebrews, of the Revelation, of 2 Peter and of the Pastoral Epistles was in turn subjected to keen criticism and their claim to canonicals disputed. No such doubts were raised in regard to the authenticity of St. Matthew. It is cited or referred to by Clement of Rome, c. 95 A.D.; in the *Didachè*, probably c. 100 A.D.; by Ignatius, c. 107-115 A.D.; by Polycarp, c. 110 A.D.; by Papias, c. 120 A.D.; by Basilides, c. 125 A.D., the first to apply the term *εὐαγγέλιον* to the Gospels; by Justin Martyr, c. 140 A.D., and Tatian, his pupil, who composed a harmony of the four Canonical Gospels, the *Diatessaron*, c. 170 A.D.

It is a striking literary fact that this position remains uncontested until the eighteenth century. Towards the end of that century Lessing, Eichhorn and Griesbach asserted the interdependence of the Synoptic Gospels. About the same date Storr and Herder maintained the priority of St. Mark. In the nineteenth century Wilke, Bauer and Volkmar followed on the same lines, while Gieseler contended for an original Oral Gospel.

The following quotations from recent editors of St. Matthew's Gospel and writers on the synoptic problem will show the position

now generally held. ¹ Dr. Stanton writes ; “ Our first and third Evangelists each had both the Marcan outline and the additional matter, or a considerable portion of it, lying before him in a written form, when he set about combining them so that he could frame a plan how best to introduce the latter into the former and could systematically carry out his plan.” And again : “ The Evangelist has skilfully combined the matter taken by him from the two documents which have just been mentioned.” Dr. Armitage Robinson adopts nearly the same view. “ It may be taken for certain,” he writes,² “ that the writer of the first Gospel used St. Mark.” The concession is made, however, that the non-Marcan portion of the first Gospel may possibly be assigned to St. Matthew.

Dr. Plummer, in his edition of the Gospel, writes : “ The answer to the question—Who was the author of the first Gospel ? is a negative one. It was not St. Matthew ” ; (p. x) again : “ Assuming that the first Gospel was written in Hebrew by St. Matthew, the Greek Gospel must be a translation from the Hebrew original ” ; and (p. xi) : “ The writer of our first Gospel used St. Mark in nearly the same form as that in which it has come down to us.”

Archdeacon Allen, with even greater confidence, speaks of the proved priority of the second Gospel to the other two synoptic Gospels as “ the one solid result of literary criticism.” (Introduction, p. vii.)

And Dr. Macneile, speaking of the date, writes : “ a *terminus a quo* is afforded by the fact that our Evangelist (i.e. St. Matthew) used the second Gospel practically in its present form, the latter must probably be placed before [the fall of Jerusalem, A.D. 70.” The author was certainly not St. Matthew the Apostle—and why ? “ An eye-witness would not have been content to base his work on that of a secondary authority.”

Here it may be noted that the priority of St. Mark is taken for proved without need of further argument, and on that very disputable conclusion, the authenticity of the first Gospel is denied.

On the other hand, the priority and authenticity of St. Matthew's Gospel are maintained in recent times by theologians of no less repute, such as ³ Westcott, ⁴ Hort, Lightfoot and Zahn. And

¹ Stanton, *The Gospels as Historical Documents*, Part II, 24 and 323.

² *The Study of the Gospels*, p. 17.

³ *Canon of the New Testament*, 69 foll.

⁴ *Ecclesia*.

⁵ *On Supernatural Religion*.

in favour of the conservative position is the ancient and continuous tradition, as cited above. It should be remembered that the assertion of the priority of the second Gospel and its use in a written form by the authors of the first and third Gospels involves, or is thought to involve, a denial of the authenticity of the Gospel according to St. Matthew: in other words, the first Gospel can no longer be regarded as direct Apostolic evidence of the words and acts of Jesus Christ.

The synoptic problem is not, therefore, one of literary or academic importance only, it is one of supreme spiritual interest. It makes an enormous difference in regard to the foundations of our faith whether we are to believe that the Gospels—the “word” or *λόγος* spoken of by Jesus in His high priestly prayer—were written by those whom He was then addressing or not. It is indeed *prima facie* most improbable that no one of the Apostles should have been the author of a Gospel. Still more improbable is it that during St. Matthew’s lifetime any one should have put forth a Gospel under his name, or that doing so a “compiler” should “edit” the Apostolic tradition even to the extent of changing Our Lord’s words to suit the circumstances of Church life in the second century. In any case it is no unreasonable claim that the problem should be restated and re-examined.

The modern critical position which now generally holds the field as indicated above is that the first Gospel is the work of an anonymous “compiler” possibly as early as 50 A.D., possibly living in the second century, who composed his work partly from material supplied by St. Mark, partly from an unknown source known for the sake of convenience as “Q” or “Quellen.”

The arguments in support of this hypothesis are mainly:—
 (1) The fact that the whole or nearly the whole of St. Mark’s Gospel is incorporated in St. Matthew’s Gospel. (2) That the same sequence of events is followed in these two Gospels. (3) That references are made which imply a comparatively late phase of Church life and organization.

This is only partially true.¹ “Nothing,” says Mr. James in his recent *Harmony of the Gospels*, “can be more mistaken than the common notion that St. Mark’s Gospel is a mere epitome of St. Matthew’s. On the contrary, in several of the parallelisms St.

Mark's Gospel far exceeds (in length) that of the other Synoptics." Professor J. H. White quotes eleven instances where this is the case,¹ in five of which St. Mark's record contains twice as many words as St. Matthew's. Commentators naturally find it difficult to account for this condensation. Archdeacon Allen writes²: "The writer of the first Gospel represents the tradition of the Church at a later stage of development than does the second. And it is quite clear that as the years passed there was a tendency to modify the tradition with regard to the Lord's sayings and actions. The later writer omits clauses, which seems to attribute failure or lack of power to Christ." A statement of that kind leaves the reader of the Gospel in a condition of absolute ignorance as to what Our Lord said or did not say. And after all it is a pure conjecture thrown out to avoid a supposed difficulty.

In pursuance of his theory Archdeacon Allen accounts for alterations and compression in St. Matthew's Gospel by "an increasing feeling of reverence for the person of Christ" resulting in the omission of words and phrases which attribute human emotion to Christ or describe Him as asking questions. Among other instances cited are, "looked round about on them with anger" (Mark iii. 3), "moved with compassion" (i. 41), "marvelled" (vi. 6), "looking upon him, loved him" (x. 21). These and similar causes for omission hardly need refutation. Of the last Dr. J. H. White writes: "It is really hard to take this instance seriously. St. Matthew is said to have excised these words from dogmatic motives, because he thought it unworthy of Our Lord to love the young man!"³

It must also be remembered that whatever date is assigned to St. Mark's Gospel it was written at a time when the Christology of St. Peter, St. John and St. Paul was recognized in the Church, and that if St. Mark's narrative had been felt to be inconsistent with that Christology, it would not have been received in the Church or sanctioned by St. Peter. There could, therefore, have been no need for St. Matthew to modify the language of St. Mark if, as assumed, he had that Gospel before him.

ARTHUR CARR.

(To be concluded.)

¹ In an article in *The Church Quarterly*, July, 1916, p. 307.

² Commenting on St. Matthew in a more recent book Archdeacon Allen gives a much earlier date to the Gospel.

³ *Church Quarterly Review*, July, 1915, p. 312.