

THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN THE GOSPELS.

(Concluded from vol. i. p. 470.)

So is it in the Gospels. St. Matthew (Chapter xvii.) gives an account of that scene in Capernaum when Peter is asked, "Doth not your Master pay tribute?" and then he tells of the miracle of the fish with the stater in its mouth. But this incident is not referred to by any of the other three Evangelists: why, then, is Matthew so particular and so precise? We can easily understand. Matthew himself had been a collector of dues, and, possibly, he himself had asked at his receipt of custom the very question propounded to Peter. It is just such an incident as would fasten itself upon the mind of the quondam tax-gatherer, waking up the memories and associations of his earlier life. So in that other narrative where the Herodians seek to entrap Jesus by the question of paying tribute. In St. Mark and St. Luke, Christ says, "Shew me a penny;" but Matthew flies at once to the language of the custom-house, "Shew me *the tribute-money*." Mark and Luke give the common popular name, the "*denarius*;" but in the custom-house it is something more than a silver denarius: it is "*τὸ νόμισμα τῶν κήνσον*." It is the language of officialism, stilted and grand, and we can almost see the publican Jew levying his blackmail upon his countrymen—asking for their gold, that Cæsar's mint may turn it into fetters, and screwing up his courage to the task by saying to himself, "It is *τὸ νόμισμα*"—established by law. It is a shred of Roman red-tape, that clothed the government officer

with a show of brief authority, and Matthew's pen catches instinctively this echo from the custom-house. So, too, in the statement about Judas and the betrayal. Mark and Luke simply say, "They covenanted to give him money;" but Matthew, whose training in a government-office has taught him exactness in financial matters, tells us how much the price was, and weighs out to us the thirty pieces of blood-money.

About the life of St. Mark we know comparatively little; but this is immaterial, as it is generally admitted that St. Mark acted as a kind of amanuensis to the Apostle Peter. It is then Peter's voice we may expect to hear, as, Rhoda-like, we listen by the gate of our second Gospel. Quick, impetuous, and impulsive, St. Peter was ready for any emergency. If he had possessed our modern weakness for heraldic symbols, what motto for his crest had been so suitable as that one word *εὐθεως*—"Straightway"? It is the watchword of St. Mark's Gospel, occurring more frequently there than in the three other Gospels together. And what could be more characteristic of the man, so swift of speech and prompt in deed? There is one word occurring in this Gospel, and found also in the Gospel of St. John, which Matthew and Luke do not use—the word *πλοιάριον*, "a little ship." Matthew and Luke, the two landsmen, use only the generic *πλοῖον*; but Peter and John, the two oarsmen, make a distinction in name, as there doubtless was a difference in the build, and six times use the diminutive *πλοιάριον* (Mark iii. 9; iv. 36, *et al.*).

St. Mark, speaking of the woman with the issue, says, "She had suffered many things of many phy-

sicians." There is a certain amount of harshness about this expression, as if these physicians were heartless empirics who stopped at no torture if they could only carry on their experiments. But when St. Luke tells the story, he tempers down this severity. He puts a veil over the sufferings caused by unskilful hands, and simply says, "She had spent all her living upon physicians." It is Luke, the "beloved physician," who now writes; and we only give him credit for what is perfectly natural when we admit that his statement of the selfsame fact is toned by a keen sense of professional honour. A medical man, by the demands of his calling, is brought especially into contact with the feminine nature. He knows, as none other does, the burdens, pains, and anguish of maternity, and, as a matter of course, his sympathies are quickened toward woman-kind. And how this element pervades St. Luke's Gospel! Likening these four books to the surroundings of the Temple, St. Luke's Gospel is the "Court of the Women." He alone tells us of the meeting of Elisabeth and Mary up in the hill-country, and of the babe leaping in the womb. He alone gives us that sublime song which the Church will never let die—the *Magnificat*—which is the out-gushing of a maternal heart. He alone tells us of the woman who has lost her piece of silver. It is his hand which draws for us that picture of the two sisters at Bethany—love in action and love in rest. He alone records the names of Susanna and Joanna, who followed Christ and ministered to Him of their substance. He alone tells us of that widow whom the unjust judge was slow to avenge, and of the

“women” following Jesus to the cross. It is all through the heart of a “physician beloved.”

So, too, in the Fourth Gospel. It is very probable that St. John spent part of his life in Jerusalem, and from the fact of his being acquainted with the high-priest (John xviii. 15), we might conjecture that he had some function in the service of the Temple. Recent writers have been trying to prove, from the frequent references to the Temple in the Revelation, that John not only might, but that he must, have had some acquaintance with its routine and ritual; that none but one who was personally familiar with the Temple service, and who himself had been behind the scenes, could have written the Book of the Revelation. Let this be granted, and what a flood of light does it pour upon this Fourth Gospel! It is the Christ of Judæa it portrays, as the others tell of the Christ of Galilee. You can put nearly the whole book within a ten-mile circle, taking Jerusalem as its centre. No longer do we see the flocks of birds darting round Gennesaret, no longer the lilies and the grass of Galilee; but we have instead the “vines” of the terraced mountain-side, and the “folds” of Olivet, where the “good shepherd” has safely housed his flocks. It is John who marks his calendar by the old Jewish feasts, threading ecclesiastical phrases all through his narrative. Witness the following: “At the feast;” “midst of the feast;” “the last, the great day of the feast;” the “feast of dedication;” the “feast of tabernacles;” “the Jews’ passover was nigh at hand;” “buy those things we have need of against the feast;” these are all expressions peculiar to this Gospel. It is St. John

who tells us of the raising to life of Lazarus, and of the cure of the blind man in Jerusalem. It is he who tells us how Jesus "sat over against the treasury;" and he alone records that Temple-scene (if, indeed, the record be part of his Gospel)—how Jesus took the part of the woman whom the Pharisees were accusing (viii. 1-11). It is John who tells how Jesus was led before the council of priests, and how some of the "chief rulers" believed on Jesus. It is John who tells us of the "pool of Siloam;" of the "brook Cedron;" that Gethsemane was "a garden." He speaks of "the pavement;" of "Golgotha;" of Joseph's garden, and of his "new sepulchre"—all of which the other Evangelists omit. The others speak of a "great multitude" coming to take Jesus; but John, perhaps recognizing familiar faces, tells us it was not a disorganized rabble, but an organized band, under the command of "officers" and a "captain." St. Mark, speaking of the sword-stroke of the lusty Peter, tells us how he "smote a servant of the high-priest;" but St. John, who has a more intimate acquaintance with the household of the high-priest, tells us "the servant's name was Malchus."

While then it is one life that the Evangelists describe, or, rather, parts of one life, we see that Divine life through a human medium. If one records events omitted by others, if at times the same fact be expressed in somewhat different forms, it is only what we have a reason and a right to expect. The Divine Spirit might, and did guide them; but He made use of their several idiosyncrasies, calling into play those laws of association, affinity, and taste that are a part of our constitution.

(2) But the human element appears in the Gospels—as in fact it does in all Scripture—in a second form: *they are written after the manner of human speech*. While we are not afraid of subjecting the Bible to the very same rules of criticism we apply to any other writings, still we claim for the Scriptures the same privileges, the same latitude of language, that we allow to them. Without claiming for these Gospels a *verbal* inspiration, we may claim for them a *plenary* inspiration, *i.e.*, an inspiration more comprehensive and as complete. Though in our translations we have lost the *ipsissima verba*, yet we have the same truths those words embodied. What are words at best but an imperfect vehicle for thought, and oftentimes a drapery with which to conceal thought? Words change in their meaning, they grow old, they die; but thought does not change, thought does not die. When man was formed in Eden there was a twofold process—a creation and an inspiration; the body was made, the soul was in-breathed. So language is but an outward covering for the thought-soul; and may we not in these Gospels have the double process repeated—the thought inspired, and then the language left for the mind of the Evangelist to weave according to his own pattern? Thus, underneath these discrepancies of statement we shall find a harmony of sentiment; and when these veils of language are turned aside we shall recognize the face of the Thought we have seen elsewhere. For instance: according to St. Matthew Christ says that “two sparrows are sold for one farthing;” but according to St. Luke He says that “five sparrows are sold for two farthings.” But

let us get behind this drapery of sparrows and farthings, and we shall find the same *truth*—that these birds are very insignificant creatures,¹ and then this truth becomes part of the premise of the after syllogism which proves the Providence of God. Or we may take another illustration from the narrative which records the raising of Jairus's daughter. St. Luke tells us that when the ruler came and knelt at Jesus's feet his only daughter "lay a-dying;" St. Mark represents him as beseeching Christ greatly and saying, "My little daughter lieth at the point of death;" while, according to St. Matthew, he says, "My daughter is even now dead." Now at first sight these statements appear irreconcilable; but if we look through the mere phrasology we shall find an exact harmony of thought. It is simply a difference of tense; in one, the action or state is present; in the other, past. We find in the Greek language a remarkable vivacity, and such an interchanging of tenses as our English would not allow. Does a writer want to bring a past event vividly to the mind—making it more real, more impressive? he brings it out of the past, and instead of the aorist he uses the historical present. We have an example (John ix. 13) where they *bring* the blind man to the Pharisees (*ἄγουσιν αὐτόν*); and again (Mark v. 15), when those who fed the swine *come* (*ἔρχονται*) to Jesus. So, too, if a writer wishes to represent an action with an expression of energy, decision, or completeness, he remits it back into the past and

¹ Yet we should also note that by accepting both statements we get a significant hint that the Providence of God extends even to creatures most insignificant, embracing even the odd bird thrown into the gain.

uses the aorist for the present ; while a future action, in view of its nearness or certainty, may be conceived of as now doing, or as already done, and may be expressed by the present, aorist, or perfect. Let us apply these rules to that statement of St. Matthew, " My daughter is even now dead " (ἀρτι ἐτελεύτησεν). That is, the event is so near and so certain, that in the mind of the writer it has already happened ; there is no chance of recovery, no room for hope. We have in our idiomatic English a phrase exactly analogous—" it is all over with him ;" a phrase which, perhaps, would not bear a strict analysis, but which is most expressive, stamping at once the certainty of the event. Now suppose two persons are watching by the couch as the dying man lies in an unconscious stupor and gasps for breath. One of them says, " The man is surely dying ;" and the other answers, " Yes, it is all over with him ;" the two expressions would vary, but the underlying thought would be exactly the same. So let the Gospels be interpreted in the light of common sense ; let us test them by the same rules of criticism we apply to other writings, and many of the so-called difficulties will vanish.

(3) There is a third mode in which the human element appears in the Gospels ; and that is, the *different aim that prompted and guided the Evangelists in their task*. They do not take up the work in a chance casual way ; they do not throw the incidents into their story at random, making a shapeless conglomerate ; but each seems to have his well-defined purpose—his line of thought ; and round this line of thought the incidents crystallize into beautiful and

symmetrical shapes. They do not portray four Christs, but one Christ in four aspects; and as each views Him from the standpoint of his own design, he draws his lines of perspective accordingly. Whether there is any connection between the vision of Ezekiel and these Gospels we do not pretend to say. It may be only a fancy—and it may be something more—that recognizes in these four pictures the face of a lion, the face of an ox, the face of an eagle, and the face of a man; but if it be a fancy, it is a pleasant one, and not altogether profitless. St. Matthew shews us the face of the *lion*—Christ the King. His book links the Old with the New Testament. He holds up the lamp of prophecy, and flings its light full upon Christ the Messiah. He calls his book “the book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David;” and while St. Luke tells us of the visit of the poor shepherds, who, since they have no other treasures to offer, open their hearts and lips, and pour out the spices of their gladness and their songs; St. Matthew shews us the stately Magi, asking, “Where is he that is born king of the Jews?” and their right-royal gifts—“gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.” In St. Mark we see the face of the patient *ox*. It is Christ the Servant; going about doing good; bearing man’s burdens; walking up and down the furrows of common life, carrying a yoke that is self-imposed; servant of all, whether bound to the plough or bound to the altar. In St. Luke we see the face of a *man*. It is Christ on the human side, and so this Gospel enters minutely into the circumstances of the birth; it tells us of that per-

fect childhood and youth; it shews us the boy Jesus making the Rabbis of the Temple marvel. It is in this Gospel we find expressions like these: "and the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom;" "and when he was twelve years old;" "and Jesus increased in wisdom and stature;" "and Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age;" "he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up." It is all through the gospel of the humanity. In St. John we see the face of the *eagle*—Christ the God. Instead of tracing his genealogy up to David, Abraham, and Adam, St. John goes infinitely higher. "The Word was with God, and *the Word was God.*" That sentence is the keynote, running through the whole of this Fourth Gospel, and giving to its music such sublimity and grandeur. It is the Gospel of the discourses, the teacher not issuing from the porch of a Zeno, but coming down "from above." It is Christ the Messiah—the God.

Taking into account these and other forms in which the human element appears in the Gospels, one by one the apparent difficulties and differences vanish. More than other lives, these come stamped with authority—bearing the hall-mark of Heaven. Simple stories they are, and yet for eighteen centuries they have charmed the world, lifting up men and nations into a better holier life. And why do they thus live? live in spite of scoff and sarcasm; in spite of the deadliest assaults and the keenest criticism? Because there is a living Christ in them. He is their Alpha and their Omega, their beginning and end. The mind that is darkened by sin may

not discover Him; he whose mind is dulled by prejudice and pride may see nothing but "men, as trees, walking;" but he whose eyes are opened by the Spirit's touch, will see Jesus the Christ, clothed in a seamless robe that is woven from the top throughout. Man will step aside, and the Evangelists vanishing, like Moses and Elias in the overshadowing cloud, nothing will be seen "save Jesus only"—the perfect Man, the perfect God.

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*THE EPISTLES TO
THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA.*

INTRODUCTORY.

I DO not purpose entering on a discussion of the authorship or date of the Revelation which claims to have been written by John the Divine (ὁ θεολόγος). I accept the all but unanimous tradition of the writers of the ante-Nicene Church that it was the work of the beloved disciple, partly because the tradition in this case is sufficiently early to have something of an historical value (I refer especially to the Muratorian Fragment), partly on account of the internal coincidences of thought and language, on which I have dwelt elsewhere.¹ I hold, with not a few recent commentators, that it belongs to a date earlier than that of the persecution under Domitian, to which Patristic tradition for the most part assigned it; that it was written certainly before the destruction of Jerusalem, probably during a time in which the Asiatic Churches were suffering from the persecution of which we have traces as affect-

¹ "Bible Educator," i. pp. 27, 57.