

THE EXPOSITOR.

THE GOSPEL IN THE EPISTLES.

INTRODUCTION.

IN the "Evidences of Christianity" (Part i. chap. viii.), Paley, when treating of the probable order in which the books of the New Testament were produced, says: "Whilst the transaction [meaning the life and death of Christ] was recent; . . . whilst the apostles were busied in preaching and travelling, . . . whilst they exercised their ministry under the harassings of frequent persecution . . . it is not probable that they would think of writing histories for the information of the public or of posterity. But . . . emergencies might draw from them occasional letters to converts, or to societies of converts with which they were connected." He then proceeds to shew that it would only be after accounts had got abroad which needed correction that the apostles, or their companions, would find it expedient to send out authentic memoirs of the life and doctrine of their Master. That one of the histories in the New Testament was set forth with this view we have the testimony of its writer. St. Luke (whose history of Christ's

life we may perhaps place at as early a date as any of the works of the Evangelists), in his preface (Chap. i. 1-4), declares that many had taken in hand the work of compiling such histories, and that his own is written in order that Theophilus may not be misled by any statements of unaccredited compositions, but might know "the certainty of those things wherein he had been instructed." The writer would hardly have used such language as this, which seems to imply the existence of unauthentic and the absence of authentic accounts, had the works of St. Matthew and St. Mark been in existence.

The consideration put forward by Paley, that the Epistles have an earlier date than the historic portions of the New Testament, seems worthy of a more full notice than it was consistent with the plan of his work to bestow on it. For if these Letters be the earliest Christian documents, and if on an examination of their contents we find therein evidence of the currency and acceptance of the chief facts contained in the historic narratives, we shall have discovered hereby very good ground for an assurance of the truth of the histories which we possess; for we shall bring the date at which their substance was circulated very close to the events with which they deal, and thus shall be less troubled about deciding how early these histories came into existence in the precise form in which we have them. We shall feel sure that the facts contained in them, although not put on authoritative record, were yet well known, and had been published far and wide by those who were the first witnesses of them; and that the life of Christ, though not perhaps authentically written, had

been set forth, in its main details in the form in which we now read it, by the oral instructions of the first Christian missionaries. The importance of establishing such a position will, at the present time, be generally admitted.

Now all evidence goes to shew that what Paley put forward as the order in which the Christian writings came into existence is the true one. Adopting without discussion the results arrived at by Conybeare and Howson¹ about the dates of St. Paul's Epistles, we place the two Epistles to the Thessalonians in A.D. 52 and 53 respectively. In A.D. 57 were written the Epistles to the Corinthians and to the Galatians; and in the spring of A.D. 58 the Epistle to the Romans. As the four last-mentioned Epistles will form the subject of our present examination, it is not necessary to follow the chronology of St. Paul's writings farther in this place. With regard to the histories, we cannot arrive at anything like the same degree of certainty. St. John's narrative is admitted by all to have been the last written of the four; and of the two first of the Synoptists we can only say that there is nothing in the contents of their works which requires us to believe that they were written much before the taking of Jerusalem, A.D. 70. Of St. Luke we may affirm that his history was written before the Acts of the Apostles. "The former treatise" (Acts i. 1) may be taken to be his narrative of Christ's life, from the description which he gives of it, as a record of "all that Jesus began to do and to teach," and also from the two works being

¹ The evidence for these dates is given very fully under the account of each Epistle, in "The Life and Travels of St. Paul," vol. ii.

addressed to the same person. Now the Acts carry the history of St. Paul down to A.D. 63, and cannot have been written much later than that date, or we should have found in the work some further record of the movements of the Apostle of the Gentiles, with whom St. Luke was evidently for a long time in close connection, and with whose doings he would be likely to be well acquainted. We must allow some interval between the production of the two works, but their being addressed to the same person bespeaks the latter narrative as, in point of time, a not very distantly removed continuation of the earlier, and a space of five years seems quite enough, if not more than enough, to place between the first treatise and the second. This would give us A.D. 58 as the date at which we might with some probability place the putting forth of St. Luke's narrative, and would allow time for the many *διηγήσεις* of which this writer makes mention to have come into circulation. The tendency of modern criticism has been to assign a much later date to all the histories than is here suggested. A recent writer has gone so far as to say that "we have not found a single distinct trace of any one of them during a century and a half after the death of Jesus."¹ With statements of this nature we are not at present concerned; but, of course, the later the date which is assigned to the histories, the stronger is the force of any argument which shews that the main points of their record were assumed as well known from allusions which occur in the Epistles. We do not wish to assign a very late date to the work of any of the

¹ "Supernatural Religion," vol. ii. p. 248. Second Edition.

Synoptists, and only desire at present to point out that, in all probability, neither their narratives nor that of St. John were in existence at the date of those Letters whose contents we purpose to examine. And if in our investigation we discover in these Letters incidental allusions to the Christian history, and especially to the life of its Founder, which could not have been made except by and to persons who were well acquainted with the whole story, we shall deem such allusions a plain proof that the history of Christ, contained in our Christian Scriptures, was widely known a long time before any of our narratives were put into writing and circulated in the form in which we possess them. For a history must have long been in circulation before its details could have reached (in the times of the apostles) to congregations so far apart as were those of Rome, Corinth, and Galatia ; and must have been intimately known before allusions of so slight a nature as many which we shall have occasion to quote could be appreciated, as they are clearly expected to be, by the whole of those addressed. And, for our purpose, the slighter the allusions are, if they be clear, the stronger the evidence which they bear to our position, the better do they demonstrate those circumstances to have been known on which the allusions are founded. None but those who are thoroughly familiar with a story can appreciate incidental allusions contained, it may be, only in a single word. To make the meaning clear for others requires a longer explanation.

Nor is it without importance in an enquiry like the present that the Letters from which our evidence is to be drawn were written to congregations living at a

great distance from each other, and one of them to a Church which St. Paul had never visited. The founding of the Roman Church had been the work of others, but the Apostle is able to write to the converts there with as much freedom as to those among whom he had personally laboured. He enters into no special particulars of the life of Jesus, but gives his exhortations as if the grounds on which they were based were fully understood, and any allusions which he may make to the Founder's history were quite sure to be appreciated. From this we may see that there must have been a substantial agreement among all the Christian missionaries from the very first with regard to the history of their Master's life. If, therefore, such details as can be gathered from allusions made in the Epistle to the Romans agree in all they disclose to us with the accounts contained in the writings of the Evangelists, we may be certain that the story of Christ's life and its purpose had been communicated to the first converts at Rome in very much the same form as we now read it. And they had received this teaching several years before St. Paul wrote them his Epistle.

I have hitherto forbore to call the four works of the Evangelists by the name which is usually assigned to them, for the word "gospel" was of old employed to denote much more than in its limited application it conveys to modern ears. It was used to embrace all the preaching and teaching of the apostles long before the compilation of those histories to which we solely confine it, and it would help us to a more satisfactory appreciation of early Church history, if we could extend its signification as it was extended

in the first century. St. Paul calls his message to the Romans by this name (Rom. i. 1), where he speaks of himself as "separated unto the *gospel* of God," and a little farther on in the same chapter (verse 16) he describes his teaching as "the *gospel* of Christ." So, too, in another place when he is speaking of his preaching (Ephes. i. 13), he says that it was the "*gospel* of salvation" unto his hearers; and we can see very clearly that the restricted sense in which we now use the word was not St. Paul's use, if we look at his words to the Galatians (Chap. iii. 8), where he says, "the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the *gospel* unto Abraham;" and he likewise states (1 Tim. i. 11) that "the glorious *gospel*" was "committed to his trust," though he had been no witness of the earthly life of Jesus. Nor is the usage peculiar to St. Paul. St. Peter (First Epistle i. 12) speaks of his message and that of other Christian teachers as "the things that are now reported unto you by them that have preached the *gospel* unto you," and once more in the same chapter (verse 25), "This is the word which by the *gospel* is preached unto you."

We thus see that the apostles looked upon their preaching and epistles as the *gospel*, and it would be well to recall this wider sense of the word at the present time. For the idea which it conveys is that the facts of Christ's life had at that early date been already so widely circulated as to be subject-matter on which these exhortations by word or letter could be founded. If we could so see the *Gospel* in the *Epistles*, it would make us independent of many questions which are now eagerly agitated concerning the

time at which the historic narratives of the Evangelists were composed. To help to such a sight is the aim of the present paper—that we may be certified by an examination of some of the apostolic Letters that the history of Jesus was known for a long period before the date of the earliest Gospel, and was made the subject of constant allusion by the members of the Christian brotherhood; yea, so well known that very slight allusions were sufficient to bring to mind all the chief events of the story: and that so we may rest contented about the dates of any of the Gospels, feeling sure that histories are on the whole better written when the events with which they deal can be comprehended in their entirety, and when the lapse of years has allowed each to receive its due proportion of importance, and so take its right place in the narrative.

We propose, then, to seek for the Gospel (in the limited sense in which that word is now used) in the Epistles. And that our inquiry may be kept within reasonable limits, and at the same time freed from objections which might be raised about the dates of some of the Epistles, we shall take only those Letters of St. Paul for examination against the date of which no critic of note has ever yet raised his voice. These are (1) the Epistle to the Galatians; (2) the two Epistles to the Corinthians written within a few months of each other; and (3) the Epistle to the Romans. That these Letters were all written before the works of the Evangelists few will be found to dispute. In so far, then, as they supply us with indications of the currency of facts connected with the life and teaching of our Lord, so far will they

prove that the Gospel histories are merely authoritative accounts, issued when circumstances made it necessary to set them forth, of events which were well known from the oral teaching of the first Christian missionaries, and of the verity of which there was no dispute at all.

In conducting such an examination it will be well, for order's sake, to take some definite line for our inquiry. We shall, therefore, adopt that portion of the Apostles' Creed which relates to our Lord's life, as the thread on which to gather such allusions as are found in these Epistles, stepping aside to the earlier, though more expanded, form of the Nicene Creed whenever our subject-matter becomes more extended. These two summaries have so long commanded the adhesion and satisfied the professions of Christians, that if we find in the Epistles so much of the facts of our Lord's life as is there epitomized, we shall have in these Letters the richest parts of the Christian's inheritance. Yet it will be necessary from time to time to make digressions from this simple line of inquiry. There are several points in the history of Christ's earthly life which are not touched on in any creed. Yet some of these are at present subjects of warm controversy. For example, neither creed says anything of the miraculous acts of our Lord's life-time, all-important though they were for the success of his mission at the outset. There is much mention of miracles in the Gospels, so that we cannot omit to inquire how this subject is presented to us in the Epistles. Nor, again, is there much allusion in the creeds to those portions of Church order and the sacraments which Christ left to

his followers ; yet mention of these must of necessity be frequent in Letters which have for their chief purpose the discharge of an apostolic care of the Churches. We must inquire, then, how the allusions to these matters in the Letters accord with the accounts of their institution, as given by the Evangelists. Such digressions shall be made where an opportunity most conveniently arises, but in general the thread of our examination will be that which we have named.

Besides being useful in the way we have already indicated, *i.e.* as shewing the currency of the Gospel story, and its wide reception before the narratives of the Evangelists were composed, an inquiry like the present may perhaps serve a further purpose. It may furnish us with means of forming a better estimate of the relative importance, in the eyes of those to whom the Holy Ghost recalled all those things which Christ had commanded, of each part of our Lord's life and teaching, than we could arrive at in any other way. We shall see on what points of the history most stress is laid in the Letters, and what parts are brought least into prominence. To accomplish this will be a gain of no small value. To take an instance in illustration : we believe that our examination will shew us that the miracles of Christ, on which now so much stress is laid in Christian polemics, and on which the antagonists of Christianity seize, as the most vulnerable part of the Gospel story, and as that on which the value of Christianity most depends, were not deemed of the greatest importance by the first preachers of the Gospel. They were contented (while giving indications that they knew of and believed in the whole of the miraculous part of the

Lord's history) with asserting most definitely, and with constant reiteration, the one greatest miracle of all—the miracle of his own resurrection, and let the rest pass with but little notice, as though these by no means formed the lever whereby the world was to be moved and the nations won to Christ, after the Wonder-Worker was Himself taken up into the skies. If in points like this we learn to estimate the Gospel history as those estimated it who were Christ's first spokesmen to the world, it seems not unlikely that our judgment on the whole of Christ's life and office will become more clear, and our efforts to appreciate and explain it be more consistent and satisfactory.

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*A CHAPTER OF GOSPEL HISTORY; OR, JESUS
JUDGING HIS CONTEMPORARIES AND HIMSELF.*

I.—JOHN'S DOUBTING MESSAGE TO JESUS.

(*St. Matt.* xi. 1-6.)

EVERY thoughtful reader of the evangelic history must have been struck with the contents of the eleventh chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. The general heading of the Chapter may be given as: *Jesus judging his contemporaries and Himself.* The title, if appropriate, is a sufficient guarantee of the importance of the contents. For who does not feel what interest must attach to the opinions expressed by such an one as Christ concerning the men of his own time, amidst whom his lot was cast and his life-work performed, and concerning Himself in relation to, and in self-defence against, his