

SOME POINTS IN THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM.

I. THE PART PLAYED BY ORAL TRADITION IN DETERMINING THE FORM AND CONTENTS OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS.

It is well known to all students of recent literature on the origin of the Gospels, that the tendency of criticism has of late been decidedly unfavourable to the "Oral Theory." In proposing to discuss in this paper the part to be assigned to Oral Tradition in the production of our Synoptic Gospels, it is not my intention to call in question the general soundness of the opinion that,—after every allowance has been made for the difference between the habits of mind of the age in which, and the people among whom, the Gospel was first spread, and our own,—the similarities between the first three Gospels, both in the connexion and order of the narratives recorded and in actual phraseology, are such as cannot be satisfactorily explained without the assumption of a link, or links, through written composition. On the contrary, I myself share this opinion, and I have been led by such consideration as I have been able to give to the evidence, to accept the view now so generally held, that the first and third Evangelists had before them and used either our Gospel according to St. Mark, or a work closely resembling it.

It is, however, now commonly acknowledged that a considerable period, in which the communication of the Gospel was made solely by oral means, preceded its embodiment in writing. To the Oral Theory the merit is conceded (*e.g.* by Holtzmann, *Synopt. Evang.*, p. 50; comp. also B. Weiss, *Life of Jesus*, Eng. Trans., p. 28) that in

seizing upon this unquestionable fact its framers rightly conceived the spirit of the ancient world. But it will be worth while to examine more carefully than the advocates of the various "documentary" hypotheses appear to have done, what the influence of that first period may have been upon the written Gospels. Some of them would allow that the whole, or the greater part, of the subject-matter of the earliest of the Gospels was drawn directly from current oral tradition, and that the writers of the other Gospels supplemented to a limited extent from this source what they derived from their written sources (comp. Holtzmann, *ib.*, p. 52). But they conceive of this tradition as a mere floating, inorganic, chaotic mass. The question does not seem to have been sufficiently considered, whether the Oral Gospel, even if it never attained the high degree of fixity which the advocates of the "Oral Theory" find it necessary to attribute to it, may not have been marked by a certain amount of method. It does not appear to be in itself an improbable supposition that a certain way of telling the story of the Saviour's Life and Work should have become more or less habitual among the preachers and teachers of the Gospel; that certain outlines should have been in general followed, certain points have been seized upon and commonly set forth, and that too in the same general order, and that efforts more or less successful should have been made to preserve accuracy in the repetition even of words and sentences, especially in the case of the sayings of the Lord. If such was actually the case, a shaping influence may well have been thus exerted on the records first committed to writing, and it would be less unnatural that succeeding writers should have used these documents which adhered to the well-known outline; and they may thus have been controlled, too, in the extent of their additions to and divergencies from these sources.

The possibility that in this way the working of a common

consciousness in the Church, a common end and the experience of common needs on the part of the preachers and teachers of the Gospel, may to a limited extent and in conjunction with other causes have determined the form of the written records, has been, not so much combated, as ignored by most recent inquirers. But now Dr. Paul Ewald in a work to which Dr. Sanday drew attention in his articles on the Synoptic Question which appeared in *THE EXPOSITOR* during the earlier part of 1891, has denied expressly the operation of a common consciousness, or common action of any kind, in determining the form and contents of the Synoptic Gospels. And his argument is based not so much on the phenomena which they present in themselves, or on general considerations as to what such a cause might be capable of effecting, but on a comparison between these Gospels and the Fourth. Even by those who do not grant the Johannine authorship it is now admitted, he contends, that it must have been founded in part at least on true traditions. If so, these must, he urges, have been included in any Gospel which was in any sense the joint work of the Apostolic College, or of the Church at large; and Gospels from which, as from the first three, they are absent, cannot have this character.

This argument is not so new as might be imagined from Dr. Ewald's and Dr. Sanday's language. Meyer concludes his discussion of the Oral Theory with the reflection that apart from all other objections to it "the formation of such an original Gospel by means of the designed co-operation of the Apostles, would be simply irreconcilable with the contradictions which are presented by the Gospel of St. John" (*Com. on St. Matt.*, Eng. Trans., p. 33). And Holtzmann, who refers to Meyer, says, "If we assume the Fourth Gospel to be an authentic account, then the hypothesis (employed in the Oral Theory) becomes a complete impossibility" (*Synopt. Evang.*, p. 50, n. 4).

Dr. Ewald has, however, insisted on this argument with new emphasis. And this is not all. He has seen the necessity of finding some explanation of the "onesidedness" (to use his own expression) which, if St. John's Gospel be taken into account, must be held to belong to the narratives of the Synoptists. Even if we felt that we could take their Gospels by themselves alone, and supposed that any material connected with their subject which they did not use was of the same kind as that which they have preserved, the problem of their origin could not be satisfactorily solved by a mere literary examination of their relations, without an inquiry into the historical circumstances which may explain how the actual form that we see was adopted, and how all three were led to adhere to the same. Still more does such a general historical inquiry become necessary, if we believe in the authenticity, or even merely the substantial truth of the Fourth Gospel, and so find ourselves confronted with the question, "Wherefore the differences between it and the others?"

The advocates of the Oral Theory have not remained oblivious of this contrast. In fact their theory, which is said to be condemned by that contrast, might be justly described as in the main an endeavour to meet the difficulty which it causes. Briefly the solution which the Oral Theory offers is that the Synoptic Gospels correspond to the setting forth of the Life and Work of Christ in the first proclamation of the Gospel to Jew and Gentile, and in the more elementary instruction of the members of the Church, while the Gospel according to St. John embodies aspects which could not be appreciated till Christian experience had become matured.

But although Dr. Ewald has not done justice to the amount of thought that has been already expended upon this problem, we are thankful to him for having called attention to it afresh. He has rightly directed us, in study-

ing the Synoptic Question, to view it in connexion with wider questions as to the preservation and delivery of the facts of the life of Christ in the Church of the Apostolic and sub-Apostolic Age. He has fixed our thoughts upon the circumstances in which the Gospels were written, as furnishing the conditions which determined their form. And he has given clearly and definitely his own account of the matter; and has so raised the question to be discussed in a way very favourable to the progress of truth. It may fairly be demanded of any critic in such a case that he should place before us a theory. For it may well be that no theory could be devised altogether free from difficulties, and that our choice must in great measure be decided by considering which is burthened with the fewest.

What amount of favour Dr. Ewald's theory has met with in Germany I do not know. But the approval which Dr. Sanday has accorded to it has given it importance amongst ourselves, and alone makes it worth while for us to examine it carefully.

A general idea of Dr. Ewald's special theory may be obtained from Dr. Sanday's article in *THE EXPOSITOR* for February, 1891, especially p. 187. But it is necessary that I should state it somewhat more fully than Dr. Sanday has done.

His view, then, is that the limitations of the Synoptic narrative are due not to any cause which generally, or very widely, influenced the mode in which the narrative was delivered from the first; but to causes strictly local and particular which intervened at a later stage. While the Johannine type of narrative had been as fully at first the common possession of the Church as the rest, a shrinkage in the current tradition had in a certain Church or Churches taken place, and from the quarter in which this had happened the Synoptic Gospels emanated. Reminiscences of the teaching of individual men, and documents of a partial

nature which were not originally designed to be regarded as anything else than partial, were the chief sources at the command of the first three Evangelists. These sources had, moreover, already by the authority which they possessed caused the body of tradition which lay outside them to be less highly regarded and gradually forgotten in the immediate surroundings of these writers. "One must think of a branch separating itself, in consequence of special circumstances, from the main stream of tradition, which branch, on account more particularly of the authoritative position of those who brought about this separation, drove into the background the rest of the material,¹ at least for certain Church districts, and concentrated attention and general interest on itself. In other words, one must suppose one or more sources—and be it understood "written ones—not of properly Original-Gospel-character (*Unrevangeliumscharakter*), proceeding from an influential quarter" (*Hauptproblem*, p. 24).

In tracing out this process in detail, Dr. Ewald has employed the hypotheses as to the sources of the Gospels which, in their general outlines, have approved themselves of late to many investigators, though he has examined the subject for himself, and come to his own conclusions on individual points. Papias's account of the composition of the Gospel according to St. Mark—that it resulted from the writing down by St. Mark of what St. Peter delivered—he accepts as substantially correct. But he forms his own idea of the nature of St. Peter's instruction. St. Peter, he imagines, was accustomed to dwell with peculiar fondness on the incidents of the Galilean ministry; and this partiality of the Apostle's came to be reflected in the work

¹ It is a little difficult to conceive one stream driving another stream, and more particularly the main river from which it has been drawn off, into the background. But if this slight confusion of metaphors is condoned, the general meaning will be clear enough.

of his reporter. "The author's own contribution was confined to arrangement. 'Favourite reminiscences of Peter's, from the time when he himself companied with Jesus in Galilee and on the way to Jerusalem, put together in some scenes and edited by Mark'—thus would a modern writer have formulated the title" (*ib.*, p. 26). I may add that Dr. Ewald supposes *vv.* 1-3 of chapter i. to be a later addition, so that, if the last twelve verses are also later and replaced no other ending, there was no very formal beginning or close to the book as it proceeded from the hand of St. Mark.

Its connexion with St. Peter gave to this document great authority, and led to that neglect of other traditions, not similarly authenticated, which Dr. Ewald supposes. Within the sphere of this influence, then, the first and third Gospels were written. He hazards the conjecture that Italy may have been the country where all three saw the light. "There, too, there were Jewish Christians to whom the writer of the first might have turned" (*ib.*, p. 223, note).

The writer of our first Gospel had, however, some additional sources of information. There was a Collection or Discourses which the Apostle Matthew had compiled, and almost the entire substance of this work (Dr. Ewald holds) has passed into our first Gospel, and to a considerable extent in the same form. The "onesidedness" which may be charged against this document also, he would in part deny, in part account for by the plan of the collection. It consisted almost entirely of discourses put together to illustrate under different aspects the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. They were arranged with regard to their subject-matter and with very slight connecting links and the barest notices, where any, of the occasion of delivery. The fourth part, according to his idea of the scheme, had for subject the Lord and King of the Kingdom, and this has "a Johannine colouring throughout." But at all events this

work by St. Matthew neither gave, nor was designed to give, any general view of the Saviour's Ministry, which could have caused difficulty by its difference from that of the Fourth Gospel. At the same time its character was not such as to save Evangelists who used it from producing this result by their own writings.

We have yet to add in respect to the *third* Evangelist, that Dr. Ewald does not think it possible that his Gospel can have been derived solely from the two Apostolic or quasi-Apostolic documents which have been thus far spoken of, or from these in conjunction with our first Gospel, in which those two documents had been already once worked up. Many critics have assumed that the large amount of matter peculiar to St. Luke, and contained especially in the "Great Interpolation" (chaps. ix. 51-xviii. 14), was taken from St. Matthew's *Collection of Discourses*. Dr. Ewald is, however, of opinion that the third Evangelist found these narratives for the most part in a separate document, and the Evangelist may also, he allows, have derived a little from tradition. This third document apparently happened to be "onesided" too; while in his own researches into tradition, though he can hardly have failed to come across narratives of a Johannine type, St. Luke was restrained from inserting them by the spell which his documents exercised either directly over his own mind, or mediately through the effect which they had already had in the Christian circle in which he was living.

Such is the theory. I proceed to state the objections to it which occur to me, and which appear to me to be fatal to it. I will then, in conclusion, make a few remarks upon the older explanation of the phenomena for which it attempts to account.

1. To suppose that St. Peter was influenced, to the extent which the theory requires, in the selection of the subjects of his teaching, by the fondness of an old man's

memory, is to attribute to him a temper unworthy of the seriousness of his purpose and of his character. Dr. Sanday, indeed, in reproducing Dr. Ewald's view, suggests simply that, "what the whole Church could not omit, what the whole body of the Apostles could not omit, that a single apostle—not sitting down deliberately to write history, but merely from time to time choosing his subjects for edification—might very well fail to mention" (EXPOSITOR, p. 187). But the same considerations which determined St. Peter's selection may well have told also upon the minds of other teachers. Nor does the collection of narratives in St. Mark's Gospel or their arrangement seem to have that unsystematic and fortuitous character which would alone agree with Dr. Ewald's and Dr. Sanday's conception of its source.

2. The supposed shrinkage in the volume of tradition is a wholly unnatural process. It can well be understood that after dwelling chiefly at first on the simpler aspects of the Ministry of Jesus and of His office as the Christ, men should pass on to a livelier sense of His Divine Majesty and their minds become more occupied than before with those of His deeds and discourses which illustrated it. But to imagine that the inverse of this took place is to defy at once the laws according to which the human mind might be expected to work, and all the indications which we possess of the actual history of Christian thought. One party indeed, under the influence of Jewish prejudices, not only stood still, but, separating themselves from the general body and becoming the Ebionite sect, or sects, retrograded. But that a particular Church, or region of the Christian world, should have undergone a change in any sort analogous to this, not from any dogmatic motive, but while remaining, or desiring to remain, in true fellowship with all other Christians, and solely in consequence of the effect upon them of one or more documents, which were never

intended to produce such a result, seems to be in the highest degree improbable.

3. This difficulty becomes specially apparent when an attempt is made to fix upon the quarter of the world where the assumed conditions can be supposed to have been realised. Dr. Ewald himself has suggested Italy. But the whole of Italy felt to a considerable extent the influence of Rome. And when we remember how in the first century, as afterwards, visitors from all parts, Christians as well as others, were continually coming to Rome, and how a thrill from what was thought and done in every region of the world was experienced there, it is impossible to suppose that in the Church of Rome, or in any portion of Italy, the kind of isolation which the theory supposes can have been maintained. It is also not a little inconsistent that, for instance, the Epistle of St. Clement of Rome should be referred to by Dr. Ewald to prove the existence of a Johannine as well as a Synoptic cycle of tradition. That, I believe, it does; but then what becomes of Dr. Ewald's special hypothesis? For, according to it, St. Clement was a contemporary, hardly, if at all, even a younger contemporary, of the first and third Evangelists, and was destined soon to become, if he was not already, the most prominent person in the very Church in the neighbourhood, or in the midst, of which their Gospels were composed. Nor can any other birthplace for the Gospels more favourable to Dr. Ewald be thought of. All three Gospels being intended for Greek-speaking readers, and two of them being specially suited to Gentiles, Palestine and Syria are out of the question. Asia Minor was the region of St. John's special influence. Alexandria and Greece remain; but the situation and character of neither of these would have encouraged the formation of a distinctive type of narrative of the kind supposed, in the closing decades of the first century.

As Dr. Ewald has appealed to the early Christian extra-

canonical writers, and rightly so, for the traces they contain of acquaintance with the Johannine type of teaching, it should be remarked that the evidence of these writers at the same time tends to establish the fact that even in their generation most prominence was given to the synoptic form of the tradition. Let any one say, for instance, whether that is not his clear impression after reading Dr. Sanday's sketch of the facts of the Gospel history, as they may be drawn from the works of Justin Martyr (pp. 91-98 of *Gospels in the Second Century*, comparing also discussion of quotations from St. John, *ib.*, pp. 278-).

4. While it is difficult to imagine the existence anywhere of the assumed circumstances, it is perhaps still more difficult to believe that such purely local influences could have restrained the Evangelists in the performance of their work. It is evident in particular with regard to the author of the third Gospel, that he set about his task in an independent spirit. Moreover if there is strong reason for believing (as I hope to show in a future paper) that he was the actual companion of St. Paul who speaks in the first person plural in certain portions of the narrative of St. Paul's journeyings in the Acts of the Apostles, then he had not only visited Macedonia and Asia Minor and Italy, but Palestine itself, and had probably stayed there a considerable time during St. Paul's imprisonment in Cæsarea. How could a comparatively late and local narrowing of the tradition commonly delivered be felt to be binding by such a man?

5. Lastly, it would be exceedingly strange that three Gospels which emanated from a church-district in which the ancient tradition was delivered with less fulness than elsewhere should have attained to the position which not long afterwards they did in the Church as a whole.

The failure of this new attempt to explain the limitations—as in view of the Fourth Gospel they must be termed

—which characterise the first three Gospels in common, drives us back to consider afresh whether those who have traced them to the operation of the Oral Teaching of the early Christian preachers and teachers, have not indicated on the whole the most probable cause, even if they may have attributed too much to it, and sometimes created unnecessary difficulties by the particular form they have given to their hypothesis.

It has commonly been put forward as a part of the Oral Theory, that the Oral Gospel took shape within the circle of the Twelve Apostles, during a period when they lived together almost continuously in Jerusalem, while making at most only brief missionary excursions from it. And objectors have seized upon this as a special point of attack. It has been thought impossible that if St. John was present and bore his share in fashioning the common tradition, it would have been left wanting in all those incidents and discourses which, as the case stands, are peculiar to his Gospel. Moreover, it is said, associated as these narratives must have been in their minds with the very scenes with which at the time supposed the Apostles were surrounded, they could not have omitted them.

It does not appear to me to be necessary to connect the formulating of the tradition specially with Jerusalem. A process is to be imagined which was informal and undesignated. The minds of the twelve and their fellow-workers were filled to a remarkable degree with the same thoughts and aims, and they had work to do for a considerable period among very similar people. They had, also, doubtless a sufficient degree of intercourse with one another to allow of the example of the more forcible characters telling upon the rest. Few of them were men capable intellectually of striking out independent courses. Without any regular discussions, and for the most part through unconscious imitation, and the subtle action of one mind upon another,

their habits of teaching would be moulded after a common pattern. With regard to the possibility that a certain outline of teaching might become established in some such way, it should be remembered that in the formulation and general adoption of the Creed, we seem to have a very similar phenomenon.

Further, it is not clear that St. John must at that early period have exerted a decisive influence, or that if he had done so, the result would have been the introduction into the current popular teaching of the elements preserved in his Gospel. He was probably the youngest of the Apostolic band, and he appears to have been one of those men of reflective, meditative minds, who are only slowly brought to the point of speech and action.

In order that justice may be done to the conception of an Oral Gospel, which resembled in its general features the narratives of the Synoptists—whether Jerusalem was, or was not, its birthplace—the most essential point to be kept in mind is, that it is not to be thought of as the result of a collaboration undertaken for the purpose of delivering a *biography* of our Lord, with the chronological arrangement and relative completeness which naturally marks even a biographical sketch. The object of the Apostles in their preaching was to set forth the mission of Jesus as the Christ, and His credentials. They were primarily, as has been often said, witnesses to His resurrection. But it was clearly necessary also, even in order that the significance of His resurrection itself might be understood, that something should be told of His wonderful words and works—the ministry which ended in His Passion—together with the preparation made for His coming by His great forerunner.

That teachers having this end before them should, after speaking of the Baptist's work, have passed straight to the opening of our Lord's Ministry in Galilee, omitting that

work in Judæa which was contemporaneous with the last weeks or months before the Baptist's imprisonment, is surely not strange. Even from St. John's Gospel we should infer that our Lord's action was during that time restrained by fear of the appearance of competition with the Baptist (see reason given for leaving Judæa, John iv. 3, and note of time, iii. 24), and consequently had something of a preliminary nature. Further, we can understand why the sayings and miracles with which, in the popular teaching, the character of "the Prophet mighty in word and deed" was illustrated, were chosen from the Galilean ministry. A real development is indeed to be observed in the Lord's self-revelation, and in its effects upon the people even here. Certain turning-points are marked. There is a life-like progress with which the narrative moves towards and reaches its close. But to have taken up the other thread as well, of His manifestation of Himself in Judæa, and the judgment which different individuals and classes passed upon themselves by their attitude towards Him there, would have destroyed the simplicity and clearness of the representation and of its lessons. Moreover, the intellectual temper and the spiritual needs of most hearers of the Apostles were more nearly analogous to those of the people whom our Lord taught in Galilee than to those of the Scribes and Pharisees of Jerusalem. They were not prepared for the consideration of His disputes with the latter, or of those mysterious truths concerning His essential oneness with the Father and mystic relation to men on which He dwelt in some of the discourses to His disciples, which are recorded in the Fourth Gospel.

We believe that this deeper view of His Person was involved even in the simpler teaching, and that, in accordance with the representation of the Fourth Gospel, He Himself had anticipated the questions on this subject which must in any case have in time suggested themselves. But

many lines of evidence, as well as the natural order of thought, point to the conclusion that it was not at first dwelt upon by the Apostles in their preaching, and that Christ's own language with regard to it, and the incidents with which that language was specially associated, were only drawn forth into prominence towards the close of the Apostolic age. This view is not to be disposed of simply by the assertion that for it to hold "the Apostles themselves must all have slumbered, and not merely their reminiscences" (Ewald, p. 131). It agrees with the conception which Robert Browning has formed of the history of St. John's mind, as shown in the passage where he represents the aged Apostle explaining how he met the questionings and errors that grew more rife with his advancing years.

"Patient I stated much of the Lord's life
 Forgotten or misdelivered, and let it work :
 Since much that at the first, in deed and word,
 Lay simply and sufficiently exposed,
 Had grown (or else my soul was grown to match,
 Fed through such years, familiar with such light,
 Guarded and guided still to see and speak)
 Of new significance and fresh result ;
 What first were guessed as points, I now knew stars,
 And named them in the Gospel I have writ."¹

A process which this great student and master of the working of the human mind has thus described, cannot be regarded as impossible or improbable. It will be found to be—I venture to think—the only satisfactory way of reconciling the truth of St. John's Gospel with other facts in regard to the early faith and teaching of the Church.

The characteristics of the Synoptic Gospels constitute one of the most striking of these facts. The writers of the Gospels must, we imagine, have had a somewhat different aim from the preachers, whose teaching was the first stage in the delivery of the Gospel. The authors of the written

¹ *A Death in the Desert.*

Gospels, in all probability, regarded their work somewhat more as that of biographers. Still the general form under which the Saviour's life had been presented to them by those who "from the beginning were eye-witnesses and ministers of the word" would exercise a peculiar influence over their minds. A determining cause of this kind is commonly admitted in the case of the second Gospel, inasmuch as Papias's account of St. Mark's dependence upon St. Peter is accepted; though it may be questioned whether the Evangelist did not also call his more general knowledge of the teaching delivered in the Church to the aid of his memory of St. Peter's words, and rely besides in some measure upon the customary form of this tradition for guidance in the arrangement of his matter.

As I have already said, I myself believe that the second Gospel, or a Gospel substantially the same, was used by the writers of our third Gospel and of our Greek Gospel according to St. Matthew.¹ The authority with which such a document was necessarily invested goes far, doubtless, to explain the adoption of the same plan, and often of the same words by these other two Evangelists. But it does not seem sufficient by itself, in view of the amount of independence which they also display. Their adherence to their predecessor, however, becomes easier to understand, if the character of St. Mark's outline harmonised with the form of teaching to which they were otherwise accustomed. Dr. Ewald has felt it necessary to assume that this was the case, but he has regarded it as a purely local circumstance of late origin. We have seen however how grave the objections to that hypothesis are; and it seems less difficult to justify the belief that the type of teaching by which the spell was cast was an early and widely prevalent one, to which St. Peter's own preaching had conformed.

¹ I cannot here enter into the question of the relation of this Gospel to the Hebrew or Aramaic work.

One word in conclusion as to the bearing of this discussion on our conception of the relations of the Gospels to one another in their highest aspect as sources of Divine knowledge. Christians have learned from an early time to speak and think of a "fourfold" Gospel. To speak more strictly and fully, we have a "twofold" Gospel, though the first division opens out into three subdivisions, the common point of view of the first three being qualified in the case of each of them by important individual characteristics. On the present occasion we have been mainly concerned with the limitations common to the first three. According to the account of the matter which has been adopted in this paper, these were the consequence of the fact that they have preserved to us the more popular and elementary instruction in the Church of the first days, concerning the mission of the Christ, which was designed to meet a real need then, and one that has not ceased to be felt. Such an account of the origin of these limitations seems not only, as I have endeavoured to show, far more probable, but also far worthier of the position which these records were destined to fill, than one which traces them to the idiosyncrasy of a single Church or region, where the fragmentariness of the teaching of a single apostle, and the partly superstitious reverence for a document founded upon it, had, late in the first century, produced a certain narrowness of view.

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*THE PREFACE TO THE FIRST EPISTLE
OF JOHN.*

THIS is a homiletical Epistle, the address of an absent pastor to his flock, or to disciples widely scattered and beyond the reach of his voice. Substitute the word "say" in certain sentences for "write," and one might conceive the whole discourse addressed by word of mouth to the