

## The Gospels and Modern Criticism.

BY THE REV. ARTHUR WRIGHT, M.A., FELLOW AND TUTOR OF QUEENS' COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

### II.

THE ruler of the feast at Cana, betraying his vulgarity when he thought to parade his wit, made use of the coarse epigram, "Every man at the beginning of a banquet produces his best wines, and when his guests are drunk, then those of an inferior brand: thou has kept the good wine until now."

Mr. Halcombe thinks that the Gospels were produced according to the earthly precedent described by the ruler of the feast, and not according to the divine plan followed by Christ. St. John, he says, came first and culled the choicest fruits of all; St. Matthew followed, selecting the best of what was left; St. Mark and Luke, being evangelists, but not apostles, did not presume to record anything, nor even to copy anything, of the highest spiritual value. Indeed, the three synoptists avoided St. John altogether, as towering above their heads. They read, admired, and passed him by. But St. Mark endeavoured to serve the Church by slightly expanding St. Matthew's historical narratives, without presuming to make use of the discourses and the doctrinal portions. St. Luke added a few distinctly "ministerial" details.

Thus the best wine was set forth first, afterwards that which was worse.

To my mind such a plan of composition seems unworthy of God, and incredible in man. To take a single instance, St. Mark on this hypothesis read the words, "Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Was it humility which made him deliberately omit them, as too good for so insignificant a creature as himself to record? Or was it a conscious or unconscious feeling that they were unsuited to his readers? A man with such posterous humility was ill-equipped for the work of an evangelist. Readers so unchristian would not value a gospel.

But let us see whether Mr. Halcombe's method is followed out in other New Testament writings.

Luther described St. James's Epistle as an epistle of straw. It contains but little Christian doctrine. The spirit is that of the Old Testament, caught from Isaiah and the prophets, and only

slightly affected by the Incarnation. If Luther had but known that St. James was the earliest of the Christian writers, his estimate might have been different. He would have seen in the Epistle the pledge of future things and the assurance that the Old Testament is not contrary to the New, but simply earlier and less developed. St. James clings mainly to the Old. His Epistle is Christianity in swaddling clothes.

St. Mark's Gospel might with equal justice be described as a gospel of straw. Give it the first place, and its value is seen. It is the historical basis on which the other Synoptic Gospels are built. It is the first-fruits of the Spirit, the glory which led to glory. Put it second or third, and few scholars in this age would admit its right to exist.

Again, we have thirteen Epistles of St. Paul. Read them in their chronological order, as every Bible student ought to do, and you trace step by step the development of the apostle's inner life. They may be arranged into four groups, which to assist the memory may be roughly separated by an interval of five years in each case.

The first group (A.D. 52) contains the Epistles to the Thessalonians, which may almost be described as a youthful effort. The Tübingen critics with singular lack of appreciation judged these Epistles to be unworthy of the master-mind, and it is only as a first work that we can defend their genuineness, but as such they are of the highest value. In the second group (A.D. 57) we have the product of manhood. The Epistles to the Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans have no equal, whether we regard them in respect of creative genius, of variety or of vigour. They have been accepted as undoubtedly Pauline writings by even the most destructive and narrow-minded critics. They are practically unassailable. In the third group (A.D. 62) we have the result of chastened experience. The Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians are the work of the imprisonment. Age, grief, and disappointment have sobered, but given depth to, the apostle's spiritual hopes. To many persons these writings have been the

most consolatory of his efforts. Lastly, in the Pastoral Epistles (A.D. 68) we see the old man retiring from speculation, and devoting himself to organisation. The radical has become a moralist. He who boldly trusted to great principles now descends to petty details, for the time of his departure is at hand, and he feels the need of providing successors and endowing them.

Here, then, are all the stages of progress from weakness through strength to maturity and even the beginnings of decay. Everything shows that inspiration quickens, vitalises, energises, but does not alter the laws of thought nor change the character of the human mind.

Thirdly, let us glance at the earlier period, when writings were, according to the common belief, unknown, and only the outlines of a few great speeches have been preserved. St. Luke has collected in the Acts of the Apostles such information as we possess of the work of this period. Its meagreness and disappointing character are the best proof of its truth. Take St. Stephen's speech, which runs its weary length through fifty-two verses. Except in the last, there is not even an allusion to Christ or to anything Christian. It was in the synagogue that St. Stephen had learned to preach; and if we did not know it, we could hardly have believed that he was an officer of the Church. But St. Paul's sermon at the Pisidian Antioch is not so very much better. St. Peter's speeches attest the fact of the resurrection, and press on the Jewish conscience the guilt of the crucifixion; but except certain allusions to the fulfilment of Scripture, they do nothing more. It is only in the latter part of the book that we find anything like developed doctrine. No doubt the character of the speeches is largely affected by the audience and the surroundings; but, I maintain, it is still more due to the immaturity of the speaker's conceptions. The Christian leaders had not yet attained to the fulness of their later knowledge. Development and progress may be discerned on every side.

For it is a law of the human mind that combating error is the best way to advance knowledge. They who have never joined in controversy have no firm grasp of truth. Hateful and unchristian as theological disputes are apt to become, they have this merit, that they open our eyes. The Arian controversy, though detestable at the time, left the Church richer in the faith. And St. Paul would not have had so sure an apprehension of truth

if he had not had to combat heresy in Corinth, Galatia, and Colossæ.

But, Mr. Halcombe may reply, this is true of the doctrinal facts of the New Testament, but the case of the Gospels is different. The evangelists are not theologians or historians interpreting what they narrate, but annalists recording certain words and deeds. Proximity to the event is the one thing needful. The earliest narrator would be the best. For their faces, like that of Moses, shone from their communion with Him who is the Light, and, as years rolled on, the glory would inevitably fade away.

This is precisely the question on which we differ. St. Mark, I maintain, was an annalist. He recorded, almost without comment, what he had learned from St. Peter. But the other evangelists were historians. They interpret for us the facts which they relate. By numerous editorial notes and observations they give us the result of their meditations. By a large number of new sections they increase the store of truth. For thus was Christ's promise fulfilled, that the Holy Spirit should bring back to their remembrance what Christ had spoken to them. In other words, they did not at first understand the full meaning of their trust. They did not see what was most important in Christ's work. Their conceptions of Christianity were crude and one-sided. The deeper truths were brought home to them gradually. The glory, so far from fading away, waxed, as St. Paul says, brighter and brighter in proportion as they severally received the illumination of the Spirit of the Lord.

St. Mark's Gospel, therefore, with its naked history, came first. St. Matthew's and Luke's were founded upon it (of course, while they all existed in the oral stage), but they were slowly enriched by the gradual accumulation of facts and teaching collected from a great variety of sources.

All three evangelists, I hold, made it their single aim to give their readers everything trustworthy which they could collect. The common idea, that they picked and selected what was specially adapted to their readers, I most confidently reject. The simple fact that St. Matthew's Gospel—the gospel of the Eastern Church—has always been more popular amongst Gentile Christians than St. Luke's—the gospel of the West—upsets this most erroneous notion. I cannot doubt that St. Matthew would have given much to include in his Gospel the parable of the Prodigal Son, or that St. Luke

would have given still more for the history of the Syrophenician woman's daughter, for that is the only recorded case of mercy granted by Christ to a Gentile,<sup>1</sup> and is therefore the one fact by which his readers would be most powerfully affected. He did not give it, because he had never heard of it. It belongs to the last stage of St. Peter's memoirs, which never reached the West till the Gospels were written.

But though there was no conscious selection of what was proper, the inevitable pressure of circumstances and locality must unconsciously have moulded the development. St. Matthew's Gospel, being built up in the East, deals with the inferiority of the Law to the Gospel, the fulfilment of Scripture in Christ, the guilt of the Jewish nation for crucifying Him. It thus justifies and explains the destruction of Jerusalem, which was the one event of Providence which demanded explanation with the Jews.

If I wanted to describe the special features of this Gospel, I should call it the proclamation of Christianity amid the ruins of the Holy City. The catechists, who gradually shaped it, had the coming destruction before their eyes, and it was not finally written until that destruction was an accomplished fact.

St. Luke, on the other hand, felt very slightly the pressure of this terrible tragedy. A Gentile himself, whose work lay amongst Gentiles, he could view with comparative equanimity the events which were so overwhelming to his neighbours. For him the universality of the Gospel, and its applicability to all ages and nations, to the poor, the sick, the lost, the dying, was the essential thing. Brought up under St. Paul, he teems with the Pauline spirit. And though he delights to colour his page with details of Jewish ritual and Semitic thought, he does so with the feeling of an artist, and not because he cares for such trivialities in themselves. His Gospel is the gospel of humanity.

But if St. Matthew's Gospel and St. Luke's show traces of progress in spiritual and intellectual understanding, St. John's does so sevenfold. His opening verses reveal a depth of knowledge to which St. James never attained. Not that St. James would have contradicted them, or doubted their truth. But it is one thing to see truth when it is

<sup>1</sup> The centurion's servant (Matt. viii. 5-13; Luke vii. 1-10) was probably a Jew, and the centurion himself was certainly a proselyte.

set before you; it is another to set it forth yourself. There is such a thing as latent knowledge. The grander the truth, the more simple and obvious it is when once enunciated; but for all that it is long in coming. "The Spirit divideth to every man severally as He wills."

I suppose no one now would hold that the Gospels were written in a state of ecstasy; that the evangelists, scarcely conscious of what they were doing, held the pen while the Holy Spirit directed it. Such crude conceptions of inspiration are not favoured by Mr. Halcombe nor by any other competent observer of the facts. We agree that the inspired writers give what they had learned. I hold that they had learned it after a long search. I believe that St. John's ideas are clear, because they are the product of a life of thought. Christ's speeches, as he records them, must not be regarded as *verbatim* reports, made as it were by the help of a shorthand writer. What Christ really said, was, I maintain, often simpler and briefer. The thought is Christ's, the clothing of it is St. John's. The cast of the sentence, the choice of words, are not seldom the evangelist's contribution. This is proved by a strongly marked style and a peculiar vocabulary, not to be found in the Synoptic writers. The speeches and the narratives had been turned over in his mind and reproduced in his oral teaching for a generation. Every year they acquired some new polish, some fresh illustration. He had repeated them, till he did not sharply distinguish between the original saying and the inspired commentary. Indeed, these are perpetually mixed up. Sometimes we can see the distinction, but oftener it eludes us; so completely is the interpretation blended with the text.

This process demands time. Mr. Halcombe holds that St. John's Gospel was completed, published, and received as canonical a few weeks after the author had been blindly asking, "Lord, dost Thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" I, on the contrary, require at least several decades of experience, meditation, and prayer for the education of the greatest of the evangelists.

I do not believe that it was easier to write a gospel than to write an epistle. I deny that the one was a mere effort of memory, the other the product of thought. And, therefore, I cannot admit that St. John when he followed St. Peter about as a dumb companion,<sup>2</sup> never to our know-

<sup>2</sup> So he invariably appears in Acts iii.-viii.

ledge opening his mouth, was engaged in composing or had already completed and was known as the author of those weighty chapters which have in many respects given us a nobler conception of Christ than we can gain from any other source, and have done more to solace the sufferer than the other evangelists put together.

If Christ Himself during His period of humiliation grew in wisdom as perceptibly as He grew in stature, and needed thirty years' meditation, study of Scripture and prayer before He broke silence, much more did His youthful servant need experience and training before he commenced to write. Pontius Pilate or Caiaphas might have given us a life of Christ, which in many respects would have been fuller and more correct, historically and legally, than what the evangelists have given. We should value such a document highly for critical purposes, but it would not have been a Gospel. And why? The consecrated thought would not have been there; the sympathetic insight, which we define as inspiration, would not have discerned the treasure which should bless ages unborn.

It is impossible to separate St. John's Gospel from his first Epistle. To say that the Epistle was written as a preface to the Gospel is perhaps going too far, but the two works teem with the same ideas, and can hardly have been written at very different epochs. Now the tone of the Epistle is sad. It speaks of antagonism. The struggle against opposing forces is constant and severe. But in the first years of Christianity the apostles were triumphant. The people magnified them. The attempts of the rulers and the Sadducees to crush them failed because they were the heroes of the hour. Their converts were numbered by thousands. They carried everything before them. The Master's triumphant return was their daily expectation.

In a few years this state of things began to change. St. Stephen was martyred by a mob acting under lynch law. A general persecution followed, and the brethren were scattered. A little later, Herod Agrippa I. slew St. James the son of Zebedee. This brutal murder brought him so much popularity, that he resolved to strike a blow at the ringleader, St. Peter. It was long before the Roman authorities were aroused, but they were aroused at last, and then the outlook was black indeed.

Now if St. John wrote, as Mr. Halcombe says,

in the earliest days of Christianity, he would have been more or less than human, if his writings had not reflected the triumph of the moment. They must have been inspired with hope and the sense of coming victory. But, on the contrary, they are permeated with gloom, and with the feeling that though not crushed or capable of being crushed, yet the revelation of Christ in many quarters was not making way. And this is true of the Gospel as much as of the Epistle. Look, for example, at the use which St. John makes of that word, "the world" in both of them. It is not a new word. St. Mark uses it twice; St. Luke three times in his Gospel and once in the Acts of the Apostles. St. Peter, Paul, Matthew, James, and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews employ it still more frequently. But with St. John it is a keyword. He repeats it twenty-one times in the Epistle, seventy-eight times in the Gospel. And its meaning has been deepened. St. Luke spoke of all the kingdoms of the world. St. Paul teaches that the world by nature knew not God. But with St. John the kingdom of the world is the antithesis of the kingdom of God. Ignorance has been succeeded by active hatred. No compromise is possible. "We are of God, and the whole world lieth in the evil one." This is the result of ripe experience. This is a sign that the power of Rome was stirring itself. Tertullian thought it impossible for the Roman emperors ever to become Christian. His opinion was the natural, if too literal, deduction from the teaching of St. John.

Again, the fulfilment of Scripture by Christ was an engrossing study in the first ages. It was the subject of endless discussion with the Jews. But it was not merely a weapon to confute or persuade them: it was one of the strongest means of establishing the Christians themselves, both Jews and Gentiles, in the faith. St. Peter began the investigation on the day of Pentecost, and it was continued not only in the East, as St. Matthew's Gospel testifies, but by St. Paul in his Epistles, by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, in St. Peter's First Epistle, and in the Epistle to the Hebrews. St. John draws attention to four fulfilments, which are not expressly noticed elsewhere. They all relate to the passion, and all occur in the nineteenth chapter. (1) They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots. (2) When I was thirsty, they

gave me vinegar to drink. (3) A bone thereof shall not be broken. (4) They shall look on Him whom they pierced. St. Mark knows nothing of these fulfilments. Some of them, especially the third, are so recondite that they are not likely to have been discovered in the primitive times.

St. John not only gives the incident of the drawing of a sword and cutting off the high priest's domestic servant's ear on the night of the arrest, but says that St. Peter committed the outrage and Malchus suffered it. If both men were dead, there could be no harm in publishing their names. Otherwise some trouble might be apprehended, or why did the Synoptists suppress the information?

St. John, after completing his Gospel, added another chapter by way of supplement. The object was to correct a false opinion which was current, that his own exemption from death had been predicted by Christ. If he felt death to be drawing near, we can understand his anxiety to remove a stumbling-block from the faith of his friends. But if he wrote immediately after the Ascension, what time had there been for the rumour to spread, and what probability that it was not correct? It was an inference, an extension, of Christ's words, but at least a very reasonable extension. Lapse of time alone was showing it to be false, and lapse of time alone justified St. John in interpreting so positively our Lord's obscure words respecting St. Peter. For the prophecy, "When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest; but when thou shalt be old, another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not," does not on the face of it point to martyrdom. Only after St. Peter's death could St. John have unreservedly explained it so. Again, look for a moment at the form of the sentence: "This spake He, signifying by what death He should glorify God." How unnatural to write thus of the departure of your dearest friend, if he was still by your side. How natural if the severance had taken place five years or upwards. There is joy for the comrade who has entered upon his rest, thankfulness that the fiery trial has ended in triumph, regret that such honour should be denied to himself. Here is a typical specimen of St. John's style. The simplest words teem with the deepest meaning.

It appears from v. 2, vii. 2, xi. 18, xviii. 40, and other passages, that the Gospel was written for foreigners and persons unacquainted with Jewish customs and Jewish topography. It cannot, therefore, have been written in the first days when St. John himself lived in Jerusalem, and almost the whole of the Church was resident in that city. Indeed, if written then, it would most certainly have been written in Aramaic.

It is objected that if St. John wrote after the destruction of Jerusalem, he ought not to have said, "There *is* in Jerusalem at the sheep (gate), a pool . . . with five porches." "There *was*" would have been the necessary word. No doubt the five porches were destroyed, and the pool filled up with the rubbish. But St. John had never visited the city since its destruction. He may not have known the full extent of the demolition. It was natural for the old man to picture the scene as he remembered it in happier days. It is characteristic of great age to live in the distant past. I cannot regard this as an insuperable difficulty.

The theory of inspiration which underlies the views advocated in this paper, may seem to some people subversive of belief. I have not found it so. It may make belief more difficult, but it seems to be more in accord with the facts, and therefore in the long-run preserves faith by preventing a conflict with reason.

God's way of revealing Himself is never exactly what we should have expected. He chooses to employ human agents with all their weakness and liability to make mistakes. Inspiration quickens their spiritual perception, but does not altogether preserve them from errors of fact.<sup>1</sup> Christ might have written down His own message for us on some sheets of vellum which could have been legible to this day. Nay, the phonograph might have been invented before the fulness of time came, that we might still have for ourselves the Sermon on the Mount in the very tones with which it was delivered. But by granting none of these things, God seems to warn us against putting our trust in the flesh. After all, we are not saved by the Gospels, but by Christ.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Matt. i. 9, 11; Mark ii. 26; Luke ii. 2; John xii. 3; Acts v. 36, vii. 16.

(To be continued.)