

The Call of Peter in the Fourth Gospel

O. M. RAO

The synopsis of the Gospel story is one of the major tasks with which the textual and form critics of the four Gospels are faced. The authenticity of the records based on their historicity, chronology and sources has been rated highly by critics. At the same time the fact has to be admitted that there are discrepancies on crucial points between the Gospel records. The chief divergence is between the Synoptic Gospels on the one hand and the Fourth Gospel on the other. Our present consideration is with reference to the call of Peter. Is the divergence between the Gospels about it real or apparent? If it is real, can it be reconciled? Barrett frankly admits the difference and says that it is 'impossible to harmonize the Johannine and the Synoptic narratives'. This, however, is the negative way of evading the issue. We must see whether a positive way of facing the problem is possible at all.

The call of Peter is closely linked with the call of his brother Andrew and the two sons of Zebedee (Mark 1:16-18; Matthew 4:18-20; Luke 5:1-11). In the Johannine Gospel also Peter and Andrew go together. To them are added 'the other disciple', Philip, and Nathanael (1:35-42). Philip and Nathanael are not mentioned by the Synoptics.

Secondly, in the Synoptics Peter, along with the other three, was called on the shores of the sea of Galilee, while they were engaged in fishing. Luke introduces the miracle of the draught of fishes (Luke 5:1-11), implying that the response to the call was the result of witnessing the miracle. John is clear that the call came neither suddenly as in Mark nor through a miracle as in Luke, and that the Baptist had prepared his disciples to receive the Messiah. According to John, this took place in Judea, where the Baptist was at that time.

Thirdly, in the Marcan account we find that Jesus began His ministry after John the Baptist was imprisoned (Mark 1:14). The call of Peter was therefore after John was put in prison. In the Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, the call of Peter took place soon after the baptism of Jesus.

The chief points of difference between the two traditions may be analysed in the following way:

*St. John's Gospel.**Synoptic Gospels*

- | | |
|--|--|
| (a) Place—Judea (1:28) | Galilee (Mark 1:16) |
| (b) Time—close on baptism
(1:29) | Sometime after (Mark 1:14) |
| (c) Persons—Philip and
Nathanael included | Not named |
| (d) Circumstances—a simple
meeting | In the context of a miracle
(Luke 5:8-11) |

Attempts, both positive and negative, have been made to explain these differences. On the negative side, the historical accuracy of the Fourth Gospel has been called in question. This would mean that the call of the disciples in the Johannine Gospel cannot be credited with truth.

William Temple's words are pertinent in this connection. 'It is no doubt true', he writes, 'that St. John sets his chosen events for record because of their significance; but it is essential for his purpose that the significant occasion should also be an event.' The theme of the Fourth Gospel is that 'the Word became flesh'. It is therefore essential for John that the incidents which he narrates should be actual events.

Barrett thinks that the various accounts of the call of the disciples are legendary, produced gradually by the Church to answer the question how the disciples came to know Jesus. In his own words, 'It was natural that the church should wish to know something of the way in which its best-known leaders first came to be disciples and the growth of diverse legends of their call is therefore not surprising.'

It should be asked, however, 'Why can't we take John as following a tradition derived from the disciples who had been with John the Baptist?' With special reference to the early ministry of our Lord the account of John is of great value. Eusebius, the Church historian of the fourth century, has preserved a tradition, according to which 'the three Gospels previously written, having been distributed among all and handed to him (John), they say that he admitted them, but that there was only wanting in the narrative, the account of the things done by Christ, among the first of His deeds, and at the commencement of the Gospel. And this was the truth. For it was evident that the other three Evangelists only wrote the deeds of our Lord one year after the imprisonment of John the Baptist and intimated this in the very beginning of their history. The apostle John therefore in his Gospel gives the deeds of Jesus before the Baptist was cast into the prison' (111:24). This means that John's account was an attempt to fill the gap left by the other Gospels. Eusebius also quotes Papias to have stated that 'The elder said this also, Mark who had been Peter's interpreter wrote down carefully as much as he remembered recording both sayings and doings of Christ, not a hearer of the Lord, not a follower, but later a follower of Peter, as I said' (111:39, 15).

If it is true that Mark's Gospel is Peter's account, the omission of the latter's introduction to Jesus, as recorded in John, raises a serious question. How could Peter fail to record his own call? H. E. W. Turner has recently treated at length the question whether the tradition of Papias can be credited with truth and has given an affirmative answer. But there are other scholars, for instance, Bacon and Hagrang, who have queried this opinion. So one cannot easily take this quotation from Papias as sufficient ground to grant the claim of Peter's association with the Gospel of Mark.

On the other hand, John's account of Peter must be credited with due weight. John and Peter, as co-workers, must have known each other very intimately. It is clear that John knew the Synoptics. Therefore, it is unlikely that John would contradict the other Gospels without being sure of his own ground. By the time John wrote his Gospel Peter had come to a position of leadership and his call must have become a subject of interest for the early Church, and John may have used the occasion to give the story of the Apostle's call, the story which had not been recorded by the earlier Gospels.

Positive efforts at harmonizing the accounts have also been undertaken by scholars. Griffith Thomas and Stevens, for instance, contend that the account in the Fourth Gospel narrates the conversion, and that the account in the Synoptics the call to the ministry. Bernard, Carr, Temple and others think that the story in the Fourth Gospel was that of an informal call and the Synoptic account that of a formal call. They also stress the fact while the disciples referred to Jesus as 'Rabbi' in the Fourth Gospel, He is addressed as 'Lord' in the Synoptics. When their apprehension of Jesus as 'Rabbi' changed to 'Lord', they left their profession completely and followed Him. They also argue on the basis of the Greek tense of the verb 'to follow'. John uses the 'aorist', which they take to mean as referring to one completed action. In other words, according to Johannine account, Jesus did not call the disciples to be His followers. It has also been suggested that questions like 'Whom are you seeking?' and 'Where do you stay?' indicate that they desired an opportunity for a private conversation with Him. John says clearly that they stayed with Him 'that day' (1:39). In other words, they followed Jesus only for a day.

These arguments assume that there were two calls—one informal and the other formal. 'It is characteristic of St. John', comments the Rev. A. Carr, 'to choose for his narrative the inner spiritual first call of the apostles. The Synoptics relate the second external call of the Four'. This suggestion endeavours to answer the problem how if the disciples had been called in the beginning, they had to be called again while fishing. Since, for instance, the first call was an informal one, even after it, they continued in their profession; but when the formal call came, they gave up their fishing with the net. However, according to

the Johannine narrative, the disciples went fishing even after the resurrection (chapter 21).

Scholars like Hoskyns and Barrett leave no room for a second call: 'from the first His intimate disciples follow Jesus closely and there is no need for them to be called again'. Hoskyns states that when once they came to Jesus or followed Him, if ever they left Him, it was not to be called again. 'Henceforth it is demanded of them that they should be separated from Him only in order that they may bring others to Him.' This may have been what the first batch of disciples did when they left Jesus after staying with Him a day. They went out from Him not to be called again, but to bring others to Him. Andrew, for instance, brought his brother Simon in this way.

As to the problem of the geographical setting in which the call came to them according to the two accounts, Merrill C. Tenny throws some light. The major units of Palestine in our Lord's time were Galilee, Samaria and Judea. Most of the recorded incidents connected with our Lord's ministry took place alternately between Galilee and Judea. 'One exception might be noted', observes Tenny, 'the events which marked the introduction of Jesus in 1:19-51 (John) which includes the call of the disciples. These probably took place on the east side of the Jordan near one of the fords north of the Dead Sea and accessible both to Jerusalem and to the cities of Galilee by connecting roads.' If the call took place in this area, it was beyond Jordan near Bethbara where John was baptizing, for here John introduced his disciples to Jesus (1:34, 36). If so, the call of Peter was neither in Judea nor in Galilee, but in the province of Perea.

It may be that, on account of its proximity to both, Perea is taken for Judea by John and for Galilee by the Synoptics. According to the Johannine account, Andrew, James and possibly John were with the Baptist. Peter also must have been in the area, for otherwise Andrew could not have brought him to Jesus in a short time. After the incident Jesus left for Galilee and found Philip who was from Bethsaida, the city of Peter and Andrew. In this trip Peter and Andrew may have accompanied Jesus, and may have even invited Him to stay with them and preach the good news in their city. It must be during this stay in Bethsaida that Philip and Nathanael were called. Therefore, Andrew and Peter and James and John were called in Perea and Philip and Nathanael in Galilee.

The following conclusions may be drawn from the foregoing study:

1. The discrepancy between the Synoptics and the Johannine Gospel in regard to the call of Peter is only apparent.
2. The Marcan account is too short, and therefore gives the impression of abruptness. Luke's introduction of the miracle does not solve the problem.
3. There is general agreement among scholars today that

Jesus began His early ministry in Judea. But this fact is not mentioned by the Synoptic Gospels. John gives it.

4. John's is the last Gospel to be written. By the time it was composed Peter had become prominent and that fact gave John an occasion to offer a detailed account of his call.
5. Propositions like formal and informal call, conversion and call, or the establishment of personal relationship and official call, and so on, are attempts to hurdle over the problem posed by the post-call fishing. But in the face of the post-resurrection fishing, this may be safely ignored.
6. The call of Peter, Andrew, James and John in Mark is not treated in detail. John, on the other hand, narrates the same fact in greater detail.
7. We may conclude that the account of the call of Peter in the Fourth Gospel refers to his one call. It elaborates the story, as found in Mark, that a fisherman of Galilee named Simon left his profession and followed Jesus at Bethbara in Perea in the course of the early ministry of Jesus. He was renamed Peter by the Master.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS NUMBER

Mr. M. A. Laird is on the staff of the Serampore College.

The Rev. Dr. William Stewart is Principal of Serampore College.

The Rev. Dr. P. David is Principal of Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Madras.

Dr. H. Jai Singh is on the staff of the Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur.

The Rev. O. M. Rao is on the staff of the Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, Assam.