

## THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS<sup>1</sup>.

THE critical study of the Gospels falls naturally into three stages, which should be kept in theory distinct, however much in practice they overlap. There is (1) the literary question, the question of the literary sources of the several Gospels. The three Synoptic Gospels are certainly not independent: the later Gospels must have used the earlier, or they all three drew from a common source<sup>2</sup>. This is a matter of literary criticism, and it is logically necessary that we should begin with it, for otherwise we may treat the agreement of, say, Matthew and Mark as that of two witnesses, whereas it may prove that one is merely copying the other. But when we have separated the literary sources of our Gospels there is yet another process to be gone through, viz. (2) the criticism of the tradition. What I mean will perhaps best be understood if we go on at once to the third stage, which is (3) the investigation of the actual events of the ministry, the writing of the 'Life of Christ'. We cannot scientifically proceed at once to this third stage, before we have considered through what stages the report of our Lord's words and deeds passed in the interval between the events themselves and the composition of the documents we possess or can reconstruct.

This is an extremely important stage and yet the consideration of it is often slurred over. When we have isolated our 'original' authorities we cannot simply regard them as just so many independent witnesses such as were sought for by eighteenth-century apologists—at least, to continue the metaphor, we must expect to find them agreed upon a tale. The scenes of

<sup>1</sup> The following pages contain the greater part of a Lecture delivered last August to the members of the Vacation Term for Biblical Studies at Newnham College, Cambridge. Together with some rather more general remarks on the study of the Gospels, here omitted, it formed the Introduction to a short course on St Mark, St Matthew, and St Luke.

<sup>2</sup> In the following Lecture I tried to shew that Matthew and Luke used Mark, and also another document now lost which does not appear in Mark, together with certain other subsidiary sources.

our Lord's life on earth were indeed enacted in public and the multitudes heard His words, but our knowledge of them is derived from the disciples. We cannot hope to know more than the collective memory of the first circle of the disciples at Jerusalem. Without pressing the narrative of the Acts in all its details, we learn from the Epistle of St Paul to the Galatians that about nine years after the Crucifixion St Peter was in Jerusalem, and it is there and not in Galilee that our authorities place the home of the infant Church. Moreover we are told that 'the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul, and not one of them said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common'. This may be an ideal picture, and in any case the state of things was not permanent, but if it be at all true of individuals in any one particular we cannot doubt that it was most true with regard to their reminiscences of the Lord. The memory of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ must have been thrown into the common stock — 'when He was raised from the dead, His disciples *remembered* that he spake thus; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had said.' Out of the bare reminiscences of the disciples those sayings and acts which in the light of later events were seen to be of significance were repeated to the younger generation that gradually took the place of the companions of the ministry. The object of the Evangelists was not biography but edification.

All this tended to make the evangelical tradition homogeneous. It explains to some extent the selection of events and the method of treatment. Above all it helps us to realize what we get when we come to the final results of our purely literary criticism of the Gospels. Our second Gospel may be the work of John Mark, sometime the companion of St Peter, and it may embody some things that he had heard from St Peter's mouth. But even in this case the narrative has lost much of the personal note: it is far too even to be mere personal reminiscence. The tale of St Peter's denial, for example, may be substantially true, though personally I cannot help thinking that in some points the narrative of St Luke is here more accurate; but be that as it may, the narrative of Mark does not read like St Peter's own version of the story. It is not a tale told for the first time: it represents the way in which this little episode of the great Tragedy came to

be told in Jerusalem among the disciples twenty or thirty years after the events took place. I am not suggesting that any written document in Greek, or in the Aramaic of Palestine, underlies St Mark: the narrative is doubtless written down for the first time by the author, but some of the things which he is putting on paper had been repeated many times before by word of mouth.

And what is the historic effect of all this? It is not to be denied that it lets in the opportunity for errors of detail. 'These things understood not His disciples at the first', says the fourth Evangelist: 'but when Jesus was glorified, then remembered they that these things were written of him, and that they had done these things unto Him'. The Gospels took their shape in an atmosphere of growing and unquestioning faith; they were compiled by men writing in the light of subsequent events. Under such circumstances it is hard for memories to be drily accurate, it is easy to feel that the more obviously edifying form of a story or a saying must be the truer version. The eye-witnesses of the Word, of whom St Luke speaks, had known Jesus of Nazareth for a friend, but they had learned to believe that He was the Only Son of God and that He now was waiting until the fullness of the times at the right hand of His Father. He had lived among them as man with man, as a master with his disciples, and at the time they had not thoroughly realized the experience which they were going through. Now they felt that they would be fools and blind if they failed to see the deep significance of events to which they had paid so little attention and words of which they had only half understood the meaning.

The Gospel record had passed through a full generation of pious reflexion and meditation, before it began to be written down and so fixed for all time. The trustworthiness of the record depends therefore on the trustworthiness of the first Christians. How far were they qualified for their great task? I propose now to try and answer some part of this question. My remarks must be, I fear, somewhat vague and provisional, for this part of the subject is not so advanced as the literary criticism of the sources of our Gospels. Many writers have been content with demonstrating the good faith and sincerity of the early Christians on the one side, or on the other laying stress upon their ignorance and lack of the critical spirit. It seems to me that we need a more detailed verdict than this. The qualifi-

cations of the early Christian Church as the channel and mould of tradition cannot be satisfactorily dismissed in an epigram. Perfect witnesses the early Christians certainly were not. The perfect witness is himself a walking miracle. He should have the memory of Lord Macaulay, the justice of Dr S. R. Gardiner, the scrupulous honesty of Tillemont, the enthusiasm of a devotee, the insight of a prophet. The hero of a written biography is at a disadvantage. The written word does not reproduce the tone of the voice, the smile, the explanatory gesture. The Christ that we know is a biography, the Christ that we want to know is a life. And yet with all the disadvantages of temperament, of race, and of historical accident, under which the Christians laboured, it is at least doubtful whether they were not as well qualified for their task as was possible under the circumstances.

I wish to try and make the point that I hope to establish as clear as possible, even at the risk of prolixity. The question at issue is the qualifications and disadvantages of the first three generations of Christians—roughly from 30 A.D. to 120 A.D.—to be the guardians and transmitters of the words and deeds of the Christ. I begin with their disadvantages.

The disadvantages of the early Christians as the transmitters of tradition were disadvantages of temperament, of race, and of historical accident. Under disadvantages of temperament we may reckon that generally uncritical attitude to historical events which they shared with most of their contemporaries. It was not an age of great historians. The most famous writers of history were not great. Suetonius was a gossip, Tacitus a pamphleteer. St Luke is by far the most 'cultured' of the writers of the New Testament, and he is no more accurate than the others and less really scientific. It does not help us to accept the details of the story of Pentecost when the gift of tongues has been described by him in terms which naturally imply a sudden acquaintance with foreign languages. The disadvantages of race are familiar to us. The Romans and Greeks despised the Jews because they did not understand them. The whole of the Jewish and Palestinian associations of the Gospel narrative and phraseology were strange to Gentile Christians, and much of it was distasteful. Inevitably much was misunderstood; some misunderstandings indeed are only now being cleared up by the slow and painful investigations of modern scholars in the departments

of Rabbinic theology and the then popular Jewish Apocalyptic literature. The matter was further complicated by the historical accident, if we may so term it, of the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in A.D. 70, and the consequent breaking-up of the Jewish-Christian Churches, the only Christian communities at that period which spoke anything but Greek. These are disadvantages indeed. As I have already said, it is a wonder that so much of what is precious to us has been saved out of the whirlpool.

But there is another side to the picture, and we shall carry away a very wrong impression if we do not bear it well in mind. There are no real accidents in history. If we have in the Gospels an incomparable treasure, in which is preserved a not inadequate presentation of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this must be because those who have recorded that life and teaching were in some way eminently fitted for their work. It is because of the positive qualifications of the Evangelists and their predecessors, not because of their defects, that the Gospels are worthy of their subject.

And what were the qualifications of the Evangelists? Their chief qualification, but it was one of the 'few things needful', is *ethical sensitiveness*. I am very loth to use the vocabulary of modern literary and artistic criticism in speaking of the mental temper of early Christianity. It savours of 'superiority' where we ought to be humble; and the spectacle is not edifying of the twentieth-century critic sitting in judgement from his safe vantage-ground, fortified by archaeological learning and historical experience, upon the instincts that prompted our spiritual forefathers to leave their ancestral traditions for a kind of Jewish Nonconformity. But the expression I have used serves well enough to describe one of the most striking features of our Gospels. There are stories in our Gospels, in which some of the features must be unhistorical. There are plenty of people who find they cannot accept this or that narrative from the Synoptic Gospels, and various explanations are given of how the tale may be supposed to have originated. Some things are said to be an imitation of Old Testament tales or to have been composed to shew how Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled. Other things are said to illustrate the controversies that disturbed the infant Church. But if this be the case to any extent, is it not remarkable how little fault is found with the general tone and

atmosphere of the Gospel stories, with their general ethical and moral tendency? Does it not shew how well fitted by temper and instinct were those who handed down the Gospel tradition for the work which they performed?

Not for one moment would I suggest that the Gospels are works of ethical art, based ultimately on an idealizing imagination. The fourth Gospel may be so to some extent, but not the others. Where St Luke attempts to idealize, by smoothing down the rugged lines of St Mark, he does not improve the picture. No: Matthew Arnold's maxim, *Jesus over the heads of all his reporters!* is the true working hypothesis to guide the critic, the only one that leads to a reasonable explanation of what we find in the Gospel literature. With few exceptions the early Christians were ignorant and unlearned men, but we take knowledge of them that they have been with Jesus.

At the same time we shall do less than justice to the Church, if we do not recognize the debt we owe to her. If we praise the Gospels because they present a not inadequate picture of our Lord, we should remember that we receive them at the hands of the Church. The Gospels are not the discovery of modern critics or a view of the Founder of Christianity preserved by some obscure heretical sect. On the contrary: the Gospels, by whomsoever drawn up, and however they may be related to one another, are the *Memoirs*, the *memorabilia*, which the Church chose out to be the official records of the life of Christ. That the Church of the second century should have chosen so well is an irrefragable proof that in essentials it was inspired with the spirit of Jesus. The note of true culture is to recognize real merit, and by choosing our Gospels the Church shewed an ethical instinct that is surprising and a historical instinct that is only less wonderful. When one thinks of the explanations of Christianity that were offered by second-century theologians, both those who were accounted orthodox and those who were accounted heretics, it is, I repeat, wonderful that the Church, by which I mean the main body of Christians, should have chosen with such happy inspiration.

I must now illustrate what I have said from some of these second-century writers. To study the Gospels critically one cannot get too much saturated with the spirit of the second century A.D., so as to work back in a right frame of mind towards the successive

periods when our written Gospels were officially recognized, compiled, conceived.

I take Justin Martyr, chiefly, of course, because the extant remains of his works are so considerable that we can obtain a fair idea of his attitude to the Gospel record. But he also represents very well the close of the period during which our four Gospels gradually won their way to their position of recognized pre-eminence. It is a disputed question whether Justin, who wrote about 150 A.D., used our four Gospels. Personally I have no doubt that he did use them, very likely to the practical exclusion of other evangelical documents. For the purpose we have in hand, however, it does not matter. What we want to get are the points in the sayings and deeds of Jesus which attracted Justin. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh, and by considering Justin's references to the Gospels we shall gain some notion of what he considered the more important parts of their contents. The collection has been already made for us, and it has been digested into a sort of running narrative by Dr Sanday in his well-known work called *The Gospels in the Second Century* (pp. 91-98).

The first inference you would probably draw from Dr Sanday's long abstract of Justin Martyr's evangelical references is that he did use our Canonical Gospels, in any case that he used our Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. But leaving that question aside, what I want to examine is something rather different. I want to examine the reason that leads Justin to refer to our Lord's life and teaching. What was there that attracted him in the Gospel? What did he think worth quoting from it? If Justin Martyr be a fair representative of the Catholic Churchman of the second century, and I think he was a fair representative, we shall obtain in answering this question the reasons which led the Catholic Church to choose out our four Gospels. And, seeing that the Gospels also were the work of Churchmen, though of a rather earlier period, we shall also gain some knowledge of tendencies of thought that helped to shape the Gospels themselves.

The impression left on my own mind is twofold. On the one hand, I see an admirable moral feeling, the 'ethical sensitiveness' of which I have already spoken. On the other, an absence of historical and scientific criticism which invites all sorts of objective



errors in the presentation of the incidents of the Gospel narrative. It is significant how many of the incidents are attested by Justin, which modern critics find a difficulty in accepting. The details of both the Nativity stories are there. As in our Matthew we have the dream of Joseph, the prophecy of Micah, the Magi and their gifts, the slaughter of the Innocents by Herod, the flight into Egypt, the return in the days of Archelaus. As in our Luke we have the annunciation by Gabriel, the census of Quirinius, the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and the story of the manger. All this is just that part of the Gospels where 'advanced' modern criticism feels most sure that the historical basis is exceedingly small, and that we are dealing with popular legends, incredible in themselves and inconsistent with one another. But Justin is delighted with the Nativity stories. He sees no contradictions in them, and he appeals to their details as offering the strongest confirmations of prophecy. Again, there is hardly any episode in the Christian traditions about the Resurrection so generally rejected by 'advanced' critics as the story of the guard at the tomb. But Justin refers to Matt. xxvii 63 ff, an integral part of this episode that tells us how and why the guard was appointed<sup>1</sup>. No doubt Justin would have regarded our historical criticism with grave distrust. He declares it better that Christians should believe miracles such as were impossible to men and to their own nature, than that they should disbelieve with the outside world, seeing that those who disbelieved what God had promised should come to pass through Christ will be punished in Gehenna together with those who had lived unrighteously (*Apol.* § 19).

Thus we gather from Justin that a story which seemed to confirm a saying of prophecy was likely to be popular among the Christians of his day, and that special interest was being paid to those traditions which related the miraculous birth of their Messiah. We see that Gospels akin to those of Matthew and Luke form the staple of Justin's allusions, even if he be not actually using these very writings. From this point of view, therefore, we are not astonished to find that a very few years

<sup>1</sup> Justin (*Dial.* § 108) declares that the Jews ordained anti-Christian missionaries who said of Jesus the Galilean 'Deceiver' (Matt. xxvii 63) that after the Crucifixion οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ κλέψαντες αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ μνήματος νυκτός deceive folk λέγοντες, ἐγγιγῆρθαι αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν. This is an obvious echo of Matt. xxvii 64.



after Justin the Gospel according to Matthew and the Gospel according to Luke are received in the Church as authoritative.

Now let us turn to the other side of the picture, to the ethical side. Here we are in a different atmosphere. Justin and his fellow Christians aim at a better morality, a better rule of life, than their pagan contemporaries, and at the same time they are conscious of a fresh supply of power to walk in the way marked out for them. We Christians, says Justin, are not to be accounted Atheists, though we offer no sacrifices. The food which others would waste in sacrifices we eat ourselves, or give to those who have need. But for every kind of food and for the other blessings of life we give praise to the Creator of all, which is the only sacrifice worthy of Him, mingled with prayers that we may become again incorruptible through our faith. This, he says, we have been taught to do by Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, Jesus whom we have learnt to honour as truly the Son of God, together with the Prophetic Spirit. This is why Christians are accused of madness, in that after prescribing the worship of the immutable and eternal God they go on to the worship of a crucified human being (*Apol.* § 13). Justin feels that there may be a natural prejudice on this account against Christianity, a prejudice fostered by the evil spirits. He begs his hearers therefore to free themselves from their dominion, even as, he says, we Christians have freed ourselves that we might follow the only unbegotten God through His Son; so that some of us who formerly delighted in lasciviousness now embrace self-control, others who followed magic arts now consecrate themselves to a God who is good and kind, others who devoted their energies to amassing wealth now share their possessions for the common good, others of us who hated one another, and would have neither common intercourse nor worship<sup>1</sup> with aliens now after Christ's manifestation associate together, praying for our enemies, and trying to persuade those who are unjustly hating us, so that they also<sup>2</sup> may live according to Christ's salutary counsels, and have a good hope to obtain the like mercies with us from Almighty God. And, continues Justin, that we may not seem to be giving

<sup>1</sup> The occurrence of *ὁμοδίαυτοι* two lines below (*Otto*, vol. i p. 36<sup>o</sup>) encourages me to suggest *διαίρας τε καὶ ἐστίας* for *διὰ τὰ ἔθνη καὶ ἐστίας*.

<sup>2</sup> Omit *οἱ* with Maranus.

you a sophisticated account of our religion, I have thought it worth while to mention some few of Christ's own precepts, and you can see for yourselves whether our doctrines harmonize with His. And note that short and concise was His manner of speech, for He was no sophist, but His speech was the power of God (*Apol.* § 14).

Justin then goes on to quote a number of our Lord's sayings, mostly from the Sermon on the Mount (*Apol.* §§ 15, 16), ending with a protestation of the willingness of Christians to pay all lawful tribute to Caesar, for whose true welfare they gladly pray the one true God, remembering that Christ has said *To whom God hath given the more, the more will be required of him* (*Apol.* § 17).

These extracts give, I think, a fairly adequate view of Justin Martyr's attitude towards the contents of the Gospel. Side by side with his lack of historical criticism, as we understand the term, goes an intelligent and thankful appreciation of what after all is the essence of the Gospel message. 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast words of eternal life.' This is the keynote of Justin's attitude, and it is the attitude not of Justin only, but of the Church of his age. We find it in the *Didache*, and in the Epistle to Diognetus, and the same spirit is present in Clement of Rome. The Church put the Gospels in their position of pre-eminence because the Gospels satisfied the Church's wants. The Christians were conscious from the experience of their corporate life that He who had been crucified in Judaea was the Son of God, sent forth at the fore-ordained time, and the Gospels preserved for them the commands of the Son of God, by which they could order their lives. They gave also the details of His ever-memorable Passion and Death, and the story of His Resurrection, which was the pledge of their own eternal life; and some of them gave also what seemed to the second-century Christian a worthy and honourable account of His birth into this world.

But there is one feature of our Synoptic Gospels which seems to have aroused very little interest in the second century. It is a feature which shews us once for all that our Gospels themselves belong in their main contents not to that century but to an earlier age. This feature is the frankly biographical element, the story of the ministry. Like St Paul, the early Gentile Christians do not seem to have cared to know Christ after the flesh. The cult of the 'holy places' in Palestine belongs to a

later age. And here Justin's silence is significant. He finds occasion to mention the Nativity, the Baptism, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the fact that the Christ had power to heal the sick and raise the dead. But all this is, so to speak, part of the 'scheme of salvation'; all these things are events and circumstances theologically important. How different is the point of view in Matthew and Luke, and above all in Mark! Not that the Evangelists care for archaeology or 'local colour'; they wrote that their hearers might believe that Jesus was the Christ, and that believing they might have life in His name. But the scenes of the life in Galilee are nearer. The stories of our Lord belong in our Gospels to definite localities, to Capernaum, to the Lake of Gennesaret, to Caesarea Philippi—names which second-century writers never care to bring before their readers. As I said at the beginning of this Lecture, we are still in the region of history in the Synoptic Gospels, in the region of living memory.

It would be a curious and not unprofitable task to attempt to put together what we could learn of the life of our Lord from Christian writings outside the Gospels before the age of Irenaeus—about 180 A.D. The writings would include the Epistles of St Paul, the other New Testament Epistles, those of St Clement of Rome, of St Ignatius, and of the various Apostolic Fathers, besides what we have gathered from Justin Martyr and his contemporaries. The results, however, would be singularly disconnected. We should learn that Jesus Christ was crucified in Judaea under Pontius Pilate through the malice of His countrymen and that He rose again from the dead. We should be told many of His moral sayings. But we should be left quite in the dark as to how He spent His days among men. Jesus Christ would be practically to us a mere λόγος, a word, a kind of phonograph uttering counsels of perfection, but without human shape or features. It is the human shape that the Gospels supply for us. Let us never forget that while the Gnostic philosophers and the theologians of the second century were trying to find out the place of God the Son in the cosmogony, the Catholic Church was occupied in canonizing the Gospels. By so doing the Church kept alive for future generations the memory of our Lord's truly human life.

But the most remarkable fact of all remains to be noticed.

We have seen that Justin, whom we have taken as representing the generation that chose out our Gospels, combined the Nativity story of Matthew with that of Luke, and that this is hardly to be explained except on the hypothesis that he used these two Gospels. In other respects also these Gospels contain much that appealed to the second-century Christian, to whom the Sermon on the Mount was the basis of ethics. Let us suppose, therefore, that the Church chose out these two works to be the official account of Jesus Christ's life and teaching, together with the Gospel according to St John, of the use of which there are some traces in Justin, and even among certain heretics before his time. The total amount of information about Jesus which we get from these three sources comprises most of what is known. But if we were to try and analyse the statements made we should be met by many curious puzzles, especially with regard to the literary relation of Matthew and Luke. We should see they had common sources, but it would be very difficult to determine what use each had made of the sources or to make out their respective limits. Suppose then that we were to hear one day that Dr Grenfell and Dr Hunt had dug up in Egypt a fresh 'apocryphal' Gospel, not unlike our Gospels according to Matthew and Luke, but shorter, and unfortunately mutilated at the end in the middle of the story of the Resurrection. Suppose, finally, that when this new Gospel is published we find that most of the points in the narrative which appealed to Justin and his contemporaries are absent, that there is no Nativity Story at all, that the long ethical discourses unconnected with the narrative are either curtailed or omitted altogether, but that on the other hand the single narratives are full of graphic details and of expressions which have fallen out of Matthew and Luke, though they shew real acquaintance with the thought and customs of Palestinian Judaism. How interested we should all be in this discovery! How many monographs would be written on this newly-found Gospel! We should hear that at last we have a picture of primitive Christianity, of the likeness of Jesus of Nazareth as He appeared to His first disciples. The absence of just those points about the Gospel which most attracted the writers of the second century would explain why this document had dropped out of circulation.

This is, of course, all supposition. The actual fact, I repeat, is more surprising. That the Gospel according to Mark should have been admitted into the Canon is a fact that I cannot explain. I cannot understand what attraction it offered to the Christians of the second century which the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke did not offer, either singly or taken together, in a more eminent degree. It is, we find, very little quoted before it became part of the official fourfold Canon, that is, before the time of Irenaeus, and it is certain that it ran a very serious risk of being forgotten altogether. As every one knows, the genuine text ends at Mark xvi 8, in the middle of a sentence describing the terrified departure of the women from the empty tomb. There is no reason to doubt that the Gospel went on to describe some of the appearances of Jesus to the disciples after the Resurrection. The narrative is incomplete as it stands, and it is much more likely that the mutilation was accidental than intentional. Had it been intentional, the break would never have been made where it is, at ἐφοβοῦντο γὰρ . . . : even the sentence is left incomplete. But all our MSS ultimately go back to this mutilated text; it is therefore evident that at one time no more than a single mutilated copy was in existence, or at least available. The work had dropped out of circulation, it had lost its public, and we can only guess vaguely at the reasons which led to its resuscitation.

The fact, however, remains. By its inclusion in the Canon we are to-day in possession of a document in warp and woof far more ancient than the Churches which adopted it. The fine instinct—may we not say *inspiration*?—which prompted the inclusion of the Gospel according to St Mark among the books of the New Testament, shewed the Catholic Church to have been wiser than her own writers, wiser than the heretics, wiser finally than most Biblical critics from St Augustine to Ferdinand Christian Baur. It is only in the last half-century that scholars have come to recognize the pre-eminent historical value of that Gospel which once survived only in a single tattered copy.

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