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## THE CONTEMPORANEOUS ORIGIN OF THE GOSPELS.

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(SECOND ARTICLE.)

Judging by many recent writers, the opinion would appear to be prevalent that the Gospels, and the manuscripts of which they may have been composed, were of very late origin. The discoveries of last century forced the higher critics to put back the date by many years, but they still for the most part maintain the latest date such discoveries will allow. Nor is the idea of a late date confined to the higher critics; conservative critics seem often to take it for granted that there were no written records of our Lord's life and ministry in existence prior at any rate to the earlier epistles of the Apostle Paul. It is assumed by some that Mark was the first Gospel to be written, and was the chief source of Matthew and Luke. But Mark, it is said, was not written until, at the earliest, A. D. 63, and is the record of Peter's oral instruction, and therefore not at all composed of older manuscripts. Naturally, it is not suggested by those holding this view that the other less full and important sources used by Matthew and Luke were much older than the chief source.

Whether this idea of a late origin of the Gospel materials is generally held by the rank and file of the Christian ministry and laity is another question. My own conversations and correspondence have given me reason to think that there is among intelligent persons a widespread underlying belief, latent and undefined, that the Gospels are really of contemporaneous origin. Even in the case of scholars, in spite of much timidity in regard to this subject, this latent idea occasionally comes to the surface; as for instance in the following remarks of Dr. Edersheim in treating of the interview between Christ and Nicodemus, "The report of what passed reads, more than almost any other in the Gospels, like notes taken at the time by one who was present. We can almost put it again into the form of brief notes, by heading what each said in this manner, *Nicodemus*:—or, *Jesus*:—we can scarcely doubt that it was the narrator, John, who was the witness that took the notes." (Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Book iii, chap. 6.)

It should be remarked that it is with reference to a passage in the Fourth Gospel that the words just quoted are used by Dr. Edersheim. From Bertholdt a century ago till now, similar imaginings with reference to this Gospel have now and then found expression, although it is usually assumed that John is of very late origin. But, so far as my knowledge goes, most believing scholars are very guarded, if not silent, with respect to the date at which this Gospel was first committed to paper. Nor is this to be wondered at, for of all the Gospel problems those concerning John have been the most perplexing.

It is hardly possible for any devout Christian to doubt that in John we have the exact words spoken by the Saviour. This is specially the case with the long discourse delivered at the Last Supper. It is so intimate and affectionate, and every sentence seems so sacred, that the believer, in his inmost heart and in his most spiritual moments, feels this discourse to be the very

utterance of the Master Himself. This, of course, will not be appreciated by the modern Monistic school of theologians, but for those in the enjoyment of true religious experience, the case for the literal accuracy of the report of the Redeemer's last address to His people, and the prayer which followed, might be stated in much warmer terms. And, as a matter of fact, every sermon preached on a text taken from this portion of the Gospel, and most Christian commentaries, without raising the question, treat the theme as though the words were literally the Lord's own utterance. And this belief seems to be warranted by the language of the Gospel itself. The discourse and prayer referred to, like all the discourses in John, are given without any qualification whatever as the utterances of Christ, nor is there the slightest hint that they have been in the least degree modified by the channel through which they reach the reader.

And yet, if there is one thing more than another about which criticism is positive it is the impossibility of the discourses in the Fourth Gospel being verbally true reports of the Lord's utterances. Even conservative critics allow that the language is largely that of John, while claiming that the discourses are substantially those of Christ Himself. We have here, they say, the thoughts of Christ clothed in the language of His beloved disciple. But even this is not granted by critics who are not conservative. And it can hardly be denied that they have a strong case. It is not merely the extreme improbability that the Evangelist would be able to carry in his memory for a great number of years, and at last to record without material alteration, long discourses which he had only once heard and which at the time they were spoken could not for the most part have been fully understood by those to whom they were first addressed. This objection might be met to the satisfaction of some minds by the old conception that the words spoken were miraculously brought back to the memory of the Apostle at the time he wrote.

A more powerful argument against the authenticity of the discourses referred to is found in the dissimilarity both in style and matter between them and the addresses in the other three Gospels. It is impossible, say the critics, that the two sets of utterances could have been spoken by the same person and have been kept thus severally apart. And, as nearly everyone admits the substantial authenticity of the addresses in the Synoptics, it follows, they triumphantly assert, that these in John must be for the most part fictitious. Professor Adolf Jülicher, who although an unbeliever is usually courteous and considerate, shows no tenderness here. "A Jesus who preached alternately in the manner of the Sermon on the Mount and of John xiv-xvi is a psychological impossibility; the distinction between His so-called exoteric and esoteric teaching a palpable absurdity. The defenders of the 'authenticity' of John do, moreover, as a rule admit that the Evangelist intended to make some sort of idealisation of the sayings of Jesus—that he was in a state of *quasi* ecstasy while writing—in other words, that he gives us a picture of his Hero which exceeds the bounds of history. Science, however, cannot allow itself any such mysticism or phrase-making; in the Johannine discourses it is impossible to separate the form from the matter—to ascribe the form to the later writer and the matter to Jesus—no: *sint ut sunt aut non sint*. The specifically Johannine material, of which chapter xvii is the type was produced by a single brain. The party of apology, moreover, who do their best to disguise this fact by all manner of explanatory hypotheses, defeat their own ends, for in reality they lower Jesus in order to exalt one of His disciples to the skies. Jesus must surely be regarded, to judge from the effects which He has left upon the world's history, and quite apart from the religious aspect of the case, as a personality which either repelled or else completely subjugated others; but if Jesus' favorite disciple, after he had been withdrawn

for many years from all personal intercourse with his Master, could record a 'higher than the merely historical' impression of Him: if the Christ who is elevated to the level of the Johannine individuality is more lovable, greater and mightier than the 'strictly historical' Christ of the Synoptics: then Jesus has been hitherto consistently over-rated—then the disciple is above the Lord.' (Introduction to the New Testament, Book iii, chap. I, f. 31.)

Setting aside Jülicher's irreverent tone, what answer have apologists found to this line of reasoning? Have they found any answer that can be regarded as at all satisfactory? And, if not, is it strange that so many of the best writers on John prefer to leave critical questions severely alone?

Nevertheless there is an answer available, an ample and decisive one, if scholarship could but see its way to make use of it. The answer is that the addresses in the Synoptics and the discourses in John were spoken respectively in two different languages. Let this be recognised as a fact and the whole adverse argument falls to the ground, the dissimilarity between the two sets of utterances being in that case easily to be accounted for.

That addresses in Matthew, Mark and Luke were spoken in Aramaic and the discourses in John in Greek is strongly supported by the internal evidence, and surely the great probability that such was the case can hardly be questioned by anyone who has paid due attention to recent literature dealing with the languages used by New Testament writers. Professor Gustaf Dalman, in *The Words of Jesus*, brings an array of evidence to prove that Aramaic was generally spoken in Galilee, and that "Jesus grew up speaking the Aramaic tongue, and that He would be obliged to speak Aramaic to His disciples and to the people in order to be understood," (Page II). And the book is devoted to a study of the sayings of Christ recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, on the assump-

tion, for which Dalman also produces strong evidence, that they were spoken in that language. But he excludes the Fourth Gospel from the scope of his enquiry, because "a reconstruction (of our Lord's words) in Aramaic would here have too little prospect of success;" although he fails to perceive that the reason of this may be that Christ spoke in a different language the discourses therein recorded (page 72). But the light that has recently been thrown on those times by the large finds of papyri and other ancient documents allows no room for doubt as to the widespread use of Greek throughout the Roman empire. The farming and pastoral classes may have been as a rule content with the language of their country alone, but there can be no doubt that the official and trading classes and all educated persons spoke Greek at least as freely and as commonly as in the present day those classes speak English in many Oriental lands. All this must be clear to readers of works like those of Dr. J. H. Moulton and Professor Adolf Deissmann, even if the very existence of the New Testament itself, written in Greek in the first century, were not sufficient to prove it so far as Palestine is concerned. We know that one of the Twelve belonged to an official class and that four of them belonged to a trading class—for it is needless to point out again here that it would be as much the business of a large firm of fishermen to sell fish as to catch fish—and there is good reason to believe that all the Twelve were fairly well educated. It should therefore be regarded as not a matter of probability, but one of absolute certainty, that our Lord, traveling with the Twelve and teaching as He did in all parts of Palestine, spoke in both the current languages. And, if so, the hypothesis that John consists largely of the sayings of Christ spoken in Greek and the Synoptics of those spoken in Aramaic cannot in itself be considered an unreasonable one. Only, if such be the case, it follows of necessity that both the Greek and the Aramaic sayings were taken down at the very time they

were delivered. But then again, if reports were taken at time of delivery at all, it is surely highly probable that they were taken in both the languages in which the sayings were spoken.

In an article which appeared in the *REVIEW AND EXPOSITOR* for July, 1907, I endeavored to show that the Synoptic problem was capable of solution on the theory that the first three Gospels were composed chiefly of notes severally written during the course of our Lord's ministry by three of the Apostles in the company of and in conference with the others. And now, in this article, an attempt has been made to suggest lines upon which a simple and easy solution of the Johannine Problem may be arrived at. There are other problems in the Gospels besides the two just mentioned, but I venture to say there is not one that does not yield itself to a probable and natural explanation if once the basic theory be allowed that the notes of which the four Gospels were composed were written at the time or very soon after the events happened which they narrate and that the longer addresses of Christ were taken down at time of utterance.

I now propose to return to the question with which this paper opens and to ask, is it really possible that the first Gospel manuscripts were of later origin than the earlier Epistles? And, to begin with, is not the asking of this question very like asking whether the superstructure of a house was built before its foundations? The Gospel narratives are the foundation of the Christian faith and a knowledge of them is essential to the existence of every Christian church. The miracles Christ wrought and the parables He spoke are among the first things taught by the Sunday-school teacher to his or her class. They are also the first things taught by the missionary in heathen lands. When missionaries translate the Scriptures for the use of their converts, they do not begin with Romans or Galatians; it is rather the first or second book of the New Testament that is first presented in the language of

the country. And, on a first consideration of the question, would it not be natural to suppose that, when Apostles in early times went forth on missionary journeys, they would take with them manuscripts for the instruction in the facts of Christ's life and ministry of those who might accept the message of salvation?

No doubt the Apostles in their preaching, so far as time and opportunity allowed, apprised their hearers of the leading facts of the Gospel history, although no clear proof of this is to be found in Acts or elsewhere. Indeed, in what Paul says to the Corinthians (I., xv. 1-8), it seems almost to be implied that the only historic facts declared by him were those concerning our Lord's death and resurrection. However, in the same Epistle, Paul mentions having delivered to the Corinthians an account of the institution of the Lord's Supper, and he must have told them who Jesus was, and something about what He said and did, to make the message about His death and resurrection intelligible. But such oral teaching could only have been very limited in amount, especially in those places where, as we read in Acts, the stay was brief.

Moreover, the number to whom he could give such instruction would be small; and how much reliance could be placed on their attempts to repeat it to others? What sort of a representation of the Person, character and life-work of the Redeemer would a repetition of the Apostle's statement assume in the course of even a short time unless there were some written documents at hand to prevent men from wandering far astray from the reality? Yet there is not a word in any of the Epistles to lead us to suppose that in this respect any false views grew up. Errors in doctrine and errors in conduct there were in plenty in the churches planted by Paul; but there is no reason to suspect that there were any errors as to the kind of life our Lord lived or the work He did as He walked among men in Palestine. The omission in the Epistles either to supplement the teaching which had



been personally given on this subject or to correct mistakes is unaccountable except on the supposition that the churches had in writing already in their hands as full and perfect a narrative as even the Apostle himself was able to supply.

In Paul's letters to the churches there are two outstanding features which even the least studious reader may see. One is the great frequency with which the name of Christ is mentioned. Our Lord, by His various names and titles (not including pronouns), is mentioned in Galatians, short as it is, forty-five times; in Ephesians, sixty-five times; and in the other Epistles with similar frequency. Indeed, that Jesus Christ is the one theme of Paul's writings is recognized by everybody.

But there is another feature which is just as evident, though not so often observed. It is that almost nothing is said directly about the facts of Christ's life and ministry. That the writer is glowing with affection and enthusiasm for Christ is unmistakable; that he expects the same of his readers is also plain; yet there is scarcely an informing sentence concerning the earthly life or human character of Him whose name continually recurs. Nor is the wonder at this lessened, it is rather increased, by the fact that in one Epistle Paul does, for a special reason, give to those to whom he is writing a rather full account of the facts concerning our Lord's resurrection, and in another of the institution of the Lord's Supper.

The New Testament Epistles were obviously intended to impart further instruction to those who had been led by the preaching of Paul and others to accept the message of salvation. The knowledge of such persons, it is evident, must have been very limited, and further teaching was needed. The object of the Epistles was to supply this, and on examining them it will be found that, while making no formal attempt at a scientific theological system, they deal with the entire range of theologic truth,

and from them a complete system of theology may be derived.

The Epistles, accordingly, are a compendium of Christian doctrine; for, though their bulk is small, they omit nothing. They treat on the Divine attributes; the offices and activities of the Three Persons of the Godhead; the fall of man, human depravity, sin and punishment; the plan of salvation and the way in which it has been and is being carried into effect; predestination, election, effectual calling, repentance, faith, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance and glory; the ordinances; the Christian graces and virtues; the believer's trials, temptations, warfare and victory; the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment. All these, and whatever else it is needful or desirable to know, are dealt with in the Epistles; and yet the primary facts, without which these doctrines cannot be understood or apprehended, are not stated at all.

Even the story of Christ's death and resurrection, though so constantly emphasized, is not itself historically related; while the events of His pure and perfect life, which of necessity come first in order of teaching, are never mentioned. Yet learned men gravely tell us that, when the Epistles were written, the story of these primary foundation facts existed only in the shape of oral tradition floating loosely about in the Christian communities!

Let any one sit down to the Epistles and read them afresh with this thought in his mind; then let him say whether it is thinkable that those who it was intended should in the first instance read them had no clearer conception than oral tradition could produce of the human character of Him who is throughout the central theme of every letter.

Indeed, it stands to reason that when the early believers first accepted the glad tidings of salvation, they must already have formed some intelligent idea as to

what sort of a man He was in whom they were putting their trust. It was not for an abstraction that men changed their way of living, broke their connections, and encountered enmity and persecution. The Christian converts of apostolic times rejoiced and gloried in a Name; but not a mere name. If the minds of certain classes of men are stirred at the mention of Ignatius or Francis or Luther or Knox or Wesley or Spurgeon, it is because of the things those men said and did. And if the early Christians were willing to give up all things for the Name of Jesus it was because it shone out resplendent as the name of One whose wonderful works and words proved both His divine nature and His deep human sympathy; and therefore, as a result of His death and resurrection, the very Saviour needed by sinful men—able and willing to save to the uttermost them that come unto God through Him. That Christ was all this would be evident to those who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, were readers of the Gospel records. But, without such sources of information, how could they have attained to a knowledge of the truth? A few who heard the Apostles themselves when they personally preached, may have done so, but that any great number did, after the Apostles had gone on their way, seems most unlikely.

Is it not then only reasonable to suppose that the Apostles, when sent forth to preach the Gospel in Gentile lands, would be supplied with manuscripts narrating some of the chief events of our Lord's ministry and quoting some of His parables and other portions of His teaching, for their own use and for circulating among those to whom they were sent? If so, they would probably take two or three sets of such manuscripts, and, when they had gained converts in a town, would lend a set that a copy might be made and kept for the use of the newly-formed church, taking back and retaining their own set as soon as the copy was made. Sometimes, however, when they had to depart in haste, they might leave

one of their own sets with the people and get a fresh copy made as soon as possible thereafter. In this way they would avoid the risk either of parting with their last set or of being unable to supply a set to a church with whom their stay might be too brief to allow of a copy being made.

It was, according to Professor W. M. Ramsay, in some such manner as this that the letters in Revelation to the Seven Churches were circulated. Copies of the letter which Peter wrote from Babylon to the elect sojourners of the Dispersion in the provinces of Asia Minor must also have been distributed in like manner. So also at a much earlier date with the Apostolic Decrees of Acts xv. In this case a letter was written, addressed to "the brethren which were of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia." This was despatched first to Antioch where it was read to the assembled multitude. Not long after Paul and Silas started to visit the churches which had been established by Paul and Barnabas, "and," we are told, "as they went on their way through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep which had been ordained by the Apostles and Elders that were at Jerusalem."

It will be observed what care the Jerusalem authorities took in this instance to ensure accuracy. They were careful to run no risk of error by oral repetition of the message, but set it down in writing and sent it by circular letter to the churches. Is it conceivable that at least equal care was not taken to supply the churches with accurate information concerning our Lord Jesus Christ, and can it be doubted that the Apostles delivered to them "for to keep" copies of documents narrating at least some of the facts and sayings recorded in the Gospels?

Be it remarked that the foregoing argument is not affected by the question of the historical truth or otherwise of the Gospels. What is contended for is that the conversion of so many people in foreign countries to the new

religion could not have been effected without the aid of written narratives (whether wholly true or only partly so), similar to those now to be found in our four Gospels.

It is generally held that the first missionary journey to Gentile lands, that of Paul and Barnabas, was made sometime between the years 44 and 48. If then, the Apostles took manuscript Gospel narratives with them, such documents must have been in existence at the latest within eighteen years after the completion of our Lord's earthly life. There is, however, a widespread belief that nothing of the kind originated during so early a period after the day of Pentecost. There is no need here to discuss the reasons for this belief; it is enough to remark that it could not be so generally held unless there were very strong, if not insuperable, difficulties in supposing that written Gospel narratives were composed during that time. But, whatever may be the objections to the view that they originated so soon *after* Pentecost, the same objections do not apply to the view that they originated *before* Pentecost; that is to say, that they were written for the most part at the very time the events were happening which they record. For this is a possibility that the critics have never seriously considered; they have simply ignored it as a thing not to be thought of; and until this possibility has been considered, with as much diligence and patience as have been bestowed on other alternatives, no opinion to the contrary is entitled to have any weight.

The argument may be briefly stated thus: The progress of the Christian religion from A. D. 48, as proved by Acts and the Epistles, would have been impossible without the aid of written records akin to the material contained in our present Gospels. This and the absence from the Epistles themselves of such material makes it certain that such written records existed before A. D. 48.

By the consent of a large number of critics no such records came into existence after the end of our Lord's earthly life and before A. D. 48.

Therefore such records must have been written during our Lord's life on earth.

It may now be worth while to consider briefly the famous statement of Papias, quoted by Eusebius, "Matthew wrote down the utterances in the Hebrew language and each one translated them as well as he could." It is well understood that by "Hebrew" Papias meant Aramaic, and if proof is required it is enough to refer to Dalman in the work already mentioned (page 6). The apparent meaning then of Papias' statement is, that, before any one of the Gospels was published in its present shape, Matthew wrote in Aramaic certain documents which various persons unofficially copied and translated into Greek for the use of those who understood only that language. The question is: What were the "utterances" (τὰ λόγια) in those documents and which Matthew is said to have written down or reported (συνεγράφατο), and when did he write them?

Now, is not the most natural answer to this question as follows: The utterances were those contained in the notes of which our present Gospel of Matthew from the third chapter onward was afterwards composed, consisting largely of the sayings of Christ, and they were written down or reported by Matthew at the time they were spoken.

It is easy to understand that, immediately after the great increase in the number of believers on the day of Pentecost, such notes, if there were any, would be much in request for the instruction of converts, and generally for the edification of the Church. Consequently many copies would be made and, as Papias says, many persons would essay, as well as they were able, to make translations, more or less accurate, into Greek, the language in ordinary use by a large proportion of those now crowding into the Church. And it may well be supposed that, at a later date, when Apostles were sent forth to proclaim the Gospel in distant lands, copies of the translations al-

ready made, or specially made for the occasion, would be supplied to be taken with them.

It may be asked: If the apostles were in the habit of carrying with them on their missionary journeys manuscripts of the Gospel narratives, how comes it that no mention is made of this in Acts? The probable answer to this question is, that the practice was so well-known and understood that it never occurred to the author or authors of Acts to say anything about it. The same sort of objection may be made to the main theory, that the Gospels are composed of contemporaneous materials. If that is so, it may be asked, why is the fact nowhere stated in the Gospels themselves? The answer is, that the fact was so well-known at the time of redaction that no one thought about it or imagined that anyone would ever suppose otherwise. If, in our time, a file of newspapers were searched, it is probable that no mention would be found of the fact that each day's paper was composed of matter collected the previous day, and that the speeches contained in it were taken down while they were in course of delivery. It is a cause of difficulty in the study of all ancient literature that conditions well-known at the time are taken for granted and left unexplained, but, having long since ceased to exist, have passed out of memory, and are not now understood. Is it not possible, however, that the Gospel difficulty arises, not from any change of conditions, but for our failing to realize that people acted then much the same as people in like circumstances would act now?

It must be confessed that it is only by careful examination and comparison of the Gospels themselves that the question can be really decided, whether the notes which compose them are of contemporary date. We are told that when a new announcement was made to the Jews of Berea, they examined the Scriptures "whether these things were so," and that as a consequence "many of them believed." May it not be that an examination of

the Gospels to discover from their internal evidence whether they are of contemporary origin may likewise lead to a belief that such is really the fact? Speaking for myself, having during half a century devoted much time to the critical study of the Bible, and for the last sixteen years of that period with this question constantly in view, there is nothing which seems to be more certain than:

(1) That the birth stories in Luke and Matthew were written by Mary and Joseph in the Saviour's infancy;

(2) That the story of the visit to the Temple was written by Mary, also soon after the event;

(3) That the narratives of the Ministry in the four Gospels were written during the last two years of the Ministry itself; the reports of the longer utterances of Christ being taken down in the course of their being delivered; and

(4) That the accounts of the Passion and Resurrection were all written in the course of the forty days that followed the latter event, and before the Ascension of Jesus to the skies.