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978-1-107-45892-5 - The Gospels as Historical Documents: Part II: The Synoptic Gospel

Vincent Henry Stanton

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: THE PRESENT POSITION
OF THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM.

IN the first Part of this work I have discussed the history of the reception which the Four Gospels met with in the second century, and have thereby arrived at certain conclusions in regard to the times by which they must have been composed, the quarters whence they emanated and the amount of authority which, on these grounds and by virtue of the position accorded to them in the Church, they possess. Some questions which we had to consider related to individual Gospels, especially the fourth. Nevertheless we found that the history of the recognition of the Fourfold Gospel had to be regarded as a whole in order that even its parts may be understood. In the examination, however, of the Gospels themselves, to which we now pass, I shall group together the first three and reserve the fourth for subsequent study. This division of the subject will be understood at once by anyone who is at all likely to open this volume. The remarkable similarities between the first three Gospels in contents, arrangement and phraseology, owing to which they have received the name now so familiar of the Synoptic Gospels, supply the elements of a literary problem of unusual intricacy, but also of great interest and importance. In connexion with the inquiry into it we shall need to bear in mind the peculiar characteristics of the Fourth Gospel in so far only as may be necessary for realising the contrast between it and the other three; for the perception of this contrast will force upon us the conviction that the resemblances between the first three must be due to a cause, or causes, more special than simply the fact that their theme is the same.

But while the history of the composition of the Synoptic

2 *The question of the credibility*

Gospels forms a subject by itself, the view that we are led to take of it will at the same time have an important bearing upon the question of the historical character of the Fourth Gospel. For in order to estimate fairly the significance of the difference between their and the Johannine representations of the Person of Jesus and the course of His Ministry, it will be necessary to ask whether their origin is such as to preclude the probability of incompleteness, or even error, in their accounts. I would urge this consideration upon the attention of those in whose thoughts the question of the character of the Fourth Gospel overshadows all other Gospel problems, and who, perhaps not unnaturally, are becoming somewhat weary of the discussion of the Synoptic question. But apart from this it should be obvious that as the Synoptic Gospels are some of our chief authorities for the Gospel history, we cannot afford to leave any points unsettled in regard to their relations to one another and origin, which it is reasonable to hope might be decided by fuller investigation. Moreover, even in the exegesis of the Gospels severally we are brought face to face with this subject. The commentators in treating of passages in one of them which have parallels in one or both of the others cannot forbear from referring to those parallels, and the question is thus raised whether this or that difference ought to be regarded as a diverse tradition, or as due to the feeling and reflection of one or other of the evangelists, and consequently valuable chiefly as a very early comment; or again when a series of sayings is to be examined we want to know whether their collocation is likely to be original or the result of compilation.

It must be added, however, that our investigations in the present Part will only serve to contribute material towards an estimate of the historical value even of the Synoptic Gospels. Before a final estimate can be formed it will be necessary to enter fully into the question of the credibility of the supernatural element in them, which I wish to refrain from doing before the last stage of our whole inquiry. It may seem more difficult to avoid taking account of this feature of the Gospels in the present Part, where the contents of three of them will come directly before us, than it was in

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the first Part, where we were concerned only with external evidence. Nevertheless, there are strong reasons for thinking that its consideration may well be, and should be, kept separate from that of the indications of an ordinary kind as to the trustworthiness, or untrustworthiness, of the Gospels; and that after we have examined these we shall be in a better position for forming an opinion upon it. Further, as these reasons apply with quite as much force to the treatment of the Fourth Gospel as to that of the other three, it will be most convenient to defer the subject in question not simply to the end of the present Part but to the concluding one, when all four Gospels can be dealt with together.

The principal reasons for deferring it are the following¹. First, it is coming to be recognised that miraculous stories in an ancient writing, even if they are to be themselves rejected, do not discredit the whole document in the way that they were once supposed to do. If indeed we found someone in our own or recent generations relating miraculous occurrences we might be justified in regarding him as a man of bad faith, or of weak judgment, and unusual credulity, and consequently in treating him as an untrustworthy witness even when he made statements in themselves not improbable. Accordingly in the eighteenth century, and a considerable part of the nineteenth, deists and sceptics held that the supernatural element in the Gospels brought suspicion upon their statements generally. In so judging they failed, through the unhistorical habit of mind then still prevalent, to make allowance for the wide difference between their own age and that in which the Gospels were produced. In a time when all men, including the most highly educated and those of the greatest sobriety of judgment, found no difficulty in believing marvels of all sorts, a writer's testimony in regard to more ordinary events is not prejudiced by the circumstance that he also records miracles; or if in any degree it is, the question how far it should be held to be so is a delicate one. Clearly,

¹ With the following remarks cp. especially Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, p. 16 ff., Eng. trans. *What is Christianity?* p. 25 ff. Also Professor Burkitt's Paper, read to the Church Congress at Liverpool in 1904, *Church Congress Report* for that year, p. 130.

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The danger of bias

therefore, it is advisable that the evidence as to the authenticity of any such record should first be examined, irrespectively of the peculiar nature of portions of its contents.

A further reason for doing this lies in the fact that—as will be far more commonly allowed now than would have been the case even a few years ago—the connexion between mind and body is very imperfectly understood, and that consequently some classes at least of miracles described in the Gospels might have happened as (in a certain sense) natural effects of the presence of a very wonderful Personality, Who excited faith in Himself in a remarkable degree. Room is left on this view, to a still larger extent than on the last, for attributing a historical character to the Gospel narratives, should the evidence as a whole make it reasonable to do so.

Yet again, those who, on the ground of their belief in the Divinity of Christ, would refuse to allow that what is recorded of Him is only to be regarded as possible if it can conceivably belong to the category of ‘the natural,’ may yet feel strongly that the question how far a supernatural element is actually to be admitted, and the hypothesis of illusion and legend excluded, cannot be determined *à priori*.

But it may be said that the convictions or prepossessions of a writer in regard to a matter of such profound interest as the historical truth of supernatural facts, which are assumed as the basis for the Christian Creed, must subtly influence his reasoning in all inquiries connected therewith, even though he may profess to decide subordinate questions on their own merits. Certainly it is difficult to avoid being biassed, especially in coming to a decision upon doubtful and obscure points, by the bearing which the conclusions reached will have upon ulterior positions. But I am convinced that there may be bias of more than one kind and in more than one direction, and that those who are strongly attached to the Creed of the Christian Church are not alone in being liable to such a fault. The best safeguard against allowing the critical judgment to be thus affected is to be found in a strong sense of the need that there is at the present time for investigations from which all partiality has been excluded, coupled with a lively realisation of the temptation in one’s

Importance of right method 5

own case to some particular form of it, and the practice of constant self-scrutiny in order to discover whether it has been resisted.

But differences of another kind also have a large share in determining opinions that are formed on the subjects with which we are dealing. We hear much of scientific criticism and its application to the history of the rise of Christianity. The validity of the processes of science should be beyond question and the results which it obtains sure. Yet there are serious discrepancies in regard both to facts, theories, and worse still, modes of argument, among those who aim at being scientific critics. The truth is, no doubt, that the study of history can never be made fully scientific in the sense which the term has when used of physical inquiries, and that in the field with which we are concerned—the history of the rise of the Christian Faith—the difficulties are of a kind to put the equipment and the capacities of the investigator to a peculiarly severe test. But the hope of clearer and more certain knowledge and of a larger measure of agreement cannot be relinquished even here ;—here, indeed, it would be less possible to do so than anywhere. And I am sure that, with a view to progress towards the attainment of these ends, far more attention needs to be given to the question of right critical method, the principles which should guide the judgment, the temper and habits of mind which the inquirer should cultivate, the kind of experience which he may find most useful and of which he should seek to avail himself, than these subjects have hitherto commonly received. It is true that the discussion of method, whether in the *Novum Organum* or subsequently, seems to have contributed little towards the making of discoveries in physical science. But there is this great difference between physical science and the study of history. In the former the investigator can usually have recourse to experiment, or (as in astronomy) to predictions which experience verifies, and these means of ascertaining the truth of his theories are so much more effective than all others as generally to supersede them. In consequence of such tests being available, many a hypothesis which seemed promising to the student when it occurred to

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6 *Help to be derived from studying*

him never emerges, so to speak, from his laboratory, or (if it does) speedily receives a happy despatch from other workers and is heard of no more. On the other hand, in early Christian history and other studies of a similar nature, the field becomes encumbered with unsound theories, and it takes often a long time and much labour, which might have been more profitably expended, before criticism can dispose of them effectually. Often they win favour at first through their very faults, because a one-sided presentation of the facts can be made more striking than a fuller one would be. This is a grave counterpoise to the advantages that have at times been derived from the publication of speculations, which have been imperfectly tested by their authors. It is not, I think, sufficiently felt that inasmuch as in historical criticism no practical verification of our theories is possible, there is special reason for carefully surveying, and considering, the legitimacy of the grounds on which they rest. It would perhaps be unprofitable to attempt to lay down rules of right method. A tact, which is undefinable, in the application of sound principles of reasoning is at least as important as the principles themselves. But it may not be useless to insist, that while pursuing such inquiries as we are engaged upon, the mind ought to be constantly exercising reflection upon its own processes¹.

It has long been recognised by those who have closely compared the first three Gospels that the resemblances between them in regard to words and phrases, the forms of sentences and of paragraphs, and the sequence of narratives, are such as to shew that there must be a relationship between them, either through the dependence of the Gospels themselves one upon another, or upon two others, according to the order of their priority, or through the use of a common source or common sources, in writing, or in the form of approximately fixed oral tradition; or by some combination of these various causes. And during the past 120 years or so, during

¹ Dr Sanday has done good service in his work on *The Criticism of the Fourth Gospel*, by the stress he has there laid on the question of method. See also Harnack, *Sprüche*, pp. 3 f., 143.

the history of the subject 7

which especially the phenomena in question have been investigated and discussed, the most diverse explanations of them have been proposed. In commencing the study of a subject which has this history, it is the part of common prudence that we should endeavour to turn to account the experience and the labours of the past. I make this remark, obvious as it is, because the student may not unnaturally shrink from doing this owing to the effort which it involves, and because there seem to me to be signs in some of the critical work of recent times that there has not been sufficient preparation of this kind before undertaking it, and that the work has suffered in consequence.

I desire in this chapter to state certain conclusions which have, I believe, been adequately established through investigation and controversy. In framing them I have had regard to the most salient facts, or most impressive groups of facts, to which attention has been drawn by discussion, rather than to shades of difference between theories. Where two interpretations of classes of facts agree to a considerable extent, I have allowed for them in the same proposition as alternatives, in order to draw attention to their common element, which in general corresponds, as might be expected, to the clearest part of the evidence. As propositions defining in a guarded manner the inferences which may most surely be drawn from the facts, they would, there can be little doubt, command the assent of a decided majority of critics at the present day. I am well aware that they would not command universal assent; and in justifying my statements it will be necessary for me to meet arguments adverse to them which are employed by writers, some living and some belonging to quite recent times, whose opinions are entitled to respect. I shall give reasons in every case; but it will be suitable to give them succinctly on points which have been much debated and where a large amount of agreement has been attained. In laying such stress on the agreement of critics, I would not be thought to imply that I would ask anyone to accept the conclusions without independent examination. But if we put any confidence at all in the faculties of the human mind, we must feel confirmed in our own views when

we find that they are in accord with those of a large number of persons highly qualified to judge.

But in addition to these well-assured results—for such I am convinced they are—of long and full inquiries, there are other points as to which much fuller investigation appears still to be required. These I shall indicate in the present chapter with a view to their being discussed in the sequel. By thus distinguishing between positions which have been already made good and the work that remains to be accomplished, we shall learn how to employ our own labour to the best advantage.

I. As the first ascertained point let me state that *the phenomena of relationship between the Synoptic Gospels cannot be explained as the result merely of translation from a Hebrew, or Aramaic, source. The similarities of phrase are such as require us to suppose connexions through Greek sources.*

In recent times, as well as in the early days of Gospel criticism, some have attempted to get behind our Greek Gospels to one or more Semitic documents used in them. It has not been my intention in what I have just asserted to rule such inquiries out of court, and the guarded statement which I have made above will be readily accepted, I believe, by most of those who engage in them. But the amount of verbal agreement between the three Synoptics, and between St Matthew and St Luke throughout considerable portions of the matter contained in both of them but not in St Mark, is far too great to be accounted for as the result of the accidental choice of the same expressions by different translators. This may be held, perhaps, to have been settled once for all when Eichhorn, who had at first maintained that in our Synoptic Gospels we possess three independent translations made by the evangelists themselves, or by others, from more or less expanded and altered editions of a primitive Aramaic Gospel¹, felt himself compelled afterwards to supplement this view by the supposition that the three translators, though not directly dependent one upon another, had nevertheless all

¹ See his *Allgemeine Bibliothek der biblischen Literatur*, Bd. 5, p. 784, pub. 1794.

Semitic Source

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used the same older translation in order to shorten their own labour¹.

But the above proposition is not an otiose one. Even when facts are not denied, their significance may be ignored. And so it appears to me that those who of late have been much occupied with attempts to trace in our Gospels the effects of diversity of translation from a Semitic source, have often considered too little how the question of the interpretation of the evidence on which they lay stress is affected by the signs of relationship through Greek in the Gospels generally. Herein the chief interest and importance at the present time of the proposition at the head of this section will be found to lie. And a few reflections now upon this point may serve to render clear the course to be pursued in this work, and to lighten future discussion.

Let me premise that I do not desire to see the Synoptic question restricted so rigorously as some still think it should be, or as for a long period, which ended only a few years ago, it practically was, to an investigation of the relationship of Greek documents². I hold that it has been sometimes too readily assumed that where a Semitic original existed, our evangelists knew only one and the same translation of it. There is at least one important case in which, as it seems to me, some of the phenomena are to be explained by the use of different versions—that of the discourse in St Matthew commonly called the Sermon on the Mount, and its Lucan parallel³.

But there are such strong reasons for thinking that the same Greek sources were used in large portions of the Gospels, that we are bound in the first instance to consider how far the hypothesis of the use of these Greek sources will carry us. And there is a presumption in favour of attributing differences between parallel passages in the Gospels, wherever

¹ *Einleitung in das N.T.* 2te Ausg. 1820, Bd. 1, p. 161 ff.

² P. Wernle confines the Synoptic question to this; consequently the study of Aramaic forms of thought and speech are, according to him, in place only in connexion with the origin and history of the Gospel *tradition*, which he regards as a wholly distinct subject (*Die Synoptische Frage*, pp. v, vi). Cp. to the same effect H. J. Holtzmann, *Hand.-com. zum N.T.* i. p. vi.

³ See below, p. 80 ff.

this can reasonably be done, to a certain freedom to which the evangelists felt entitled in their use of these common sources, and in which their varieties of taste and of purpose were displayed, instead of assuming the collateral use of a Semitic original, or of a multiplicity of versions of it, whose very existence is doubtful, and the knowledge of them by the evangelists still more so, and thus increasing the elaborateness and artificiality of the supposed process of composition. I will proceed to illustrate the bearing of these remarks by a few criticisms on recent writers.

A. Resch has made an elaborate study, not only of divergences between parallel passages in the Gospels, but also of textual variations, and of the different forms in which Sayings of Christ that appear to be in reality the same are given, whether in the Gospels, the Epistles and other writings of the New Testament, or by early Christian writers outside the Canon; and he has suggested Hebrew words and phrases which, through independent rendering, might have given rise to these differences¹. Now objection may obviously be taken to the soundness of an inquiry in which a single cause is assumed without regard to other possibilities. He should have compared other explanations which may be given of the differences to which he draws attention. It is evident that in many cases the same expression which might be preferred as a better translation might also, partly on the same grounds of taste, be preferred by an editor, where the question of correct translation did not enter. Again, differences due ultimately to translation might have appeared first in various forms of Greek oral tradition, and in this way have affected writers who had not a Semitic document before them, and perhaps could not have used one.

What I wish, however, specially to lay stress upon in connexion with Resch's investigations is the unsatisfactory relation in which they stand to the Synoptic question generally. He starts from certain positions which have been arrived at by the employment of the ordinary methods of Gospel criticism, and presents the results of his own inquiries into the traces of a Semitic Gospel as a testing and

¹ *Agrapha*, 1889; *Aussercanonische Paralleltex-te*, Pts. I., II., III., 1893—5.