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*ON THE GRAPHIC AND DRAMATIC CHARACTER
OF THE GOSPEL OF ST. MARK.*

ANY inquiry which brings into prominence the independent character of the several Gospels cannot fail to be of value. It is useful for us to be shewn that we possess four distinct lives of Christ; for our manner of reading and speaking of the records which the Evangelists have left us, has some tendency to make us overlook their cumulative evidence concerning our Lord's life. Moreover, from regarding the Gospels as a single history, men feel less startled at some modern theories which set forth that one of them, at least, is little else than a compilation from the others, forgetting the great sacrifice which the acceptance of such theories involves. The Gospel of St. Mark has been subjected to attacks of this kind, which represent it as a late-made cento from the other two Synoptists. Yet there are some characteristics of style of frequent occurrence in the Second Gospel which seem sufficient by themselves to demonstrate the distinctive mental tone of its author, as well as the independence of the sources from which his information was drawn. Some of the marks which stamp this Gospel as in no wise a copy it is our present object to indicate and appraise.

As Christ's whole ministerial life was objective rather than subjective, as He went about doing good, there can be no lack, in any history of it, of much that would furnish material for the painter's skill to be exercised upon. Hence we have countless pictures of events in the Gospel history, imagination

sometimes supplying details where the Evangelists have said but little. But St. Mark's narrative is of itself pictorial. There is in it a wealth of word-painting, a whole picture at times being given in a single expression; and these touches of description, are often of such a kind as to proclaim that we have in the writer an eye-witness of the incidents which he is recording. We find many illustrations of this remark in the first Chapter of the Gospel. When recording, in verse 7, the testimony of John the Baptist to our Lord's mission, it is St. Mark alone who, to the mention of the loosing of the shoe-latchet, adds the graphic expression *to stoop down*. Yet how much more vivid and pictorial does that one word (for it is but one in the original) render the whole description. Again, in verse 10 there is a striking variation of the same nature, though the Authorized Version does but notice it in the margin. St. Matthew and St. Luke say only that the heavens were *opened* for the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the newly-baptized Jesus; with St. Mark they are *rent*, or *torn*, *asunder*: a pictorial expression which no mere copyist would have ventured to introduce. In the notice, brief though it be, of our Lord's temptation there is more than one sign of independent authorship. St. Mark alone tells us (verse 12) that Christ was *driven* into the wilderness to be tempted, and the horrors of the scene of the temptation are increased by the unique addition that He *was with the wild beasts*. All who knew the desert in which the temptation took place would be aware of these additional terrors of the forty days' trial: but it was another mind than that of St.

Matthew or St. Luke which so realized the details of the picture as to bring these words into the description. And such expansions of the narrative are far beyond the province of a copyist or compiler. If we advance to verse 20 we find a similar characteristic addition. When James and John are called by our Lord, they are with their father in the ship. St. Mark alone makes mention of *the hired servants* who were with them. A notice of this kind, beside its graphic character, is instructive in another way. It narrows the circle of those from whom St. Mark could have derived his information. Such a matter of detail would have escaped all but an eye-witness ; and at this early period of Christ's ministry such an eye-witness could hardly have been other than a disciple previously called : and that could be neither St. Matthew nor St. Luke.

We have observed already that there is much material for the artist in all the accounts of the life of Christ. But whenever a painter takes in hand a subject which is described by St. Mark, there is less call made upon his imagination for details than if he depend only on St. Matthew or St. Luke. The graphic mind of the Evangelist has already accomplished a portion of the artist's task and embodied it in his description. Look, for instance, at Raffaelle's cartoon of the Transfiguration, and see for how much the painter is indebted to St. Mark alone (ix. 2-29). All the Synoptists have recorded this event, as well as the healing of the lunatic child, which followed it, and which forms the subject of the lower half of the cartoon. But St. Mark's narrative may be recognized in it at once, by its features of characteristic description.

The shining garments of the Lord, exceeding white as snow, are with him *so as no fuller on earth can whiten them.* In the actual Transfiguration, the narrative is too solemn and brief to leave room for the display of individuality, though even here St. Mark is graphic in his statement: "and suddenly, *when they had looked about,* they saw no man," a feature of the story which is entirely wanting in the other Evangelists. But in the scene at the foot of the mount, St. Mark's peculiar style is abundantly apparent. To him alone we owe the mention of the Scribes assembled and questioning with the multitude, and of the eager running of the crowd to salute Jesus as He came near. He gives, in dramatic language, Christ's inquiry, and the distressed answer of the father of the demoniac boy. He alone records the details of the previous sufferings of the child and of the long-standing nature of the malady by which he is afflicted. He alone relates the attack which seized on him at the very moment he was brought before our Lord, the agony of which seizure the painter has so strikingly portrayed. With the same peculiar fulness the particulars of the cure are narrated. "When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee come out of him, and enter no more into him; and the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him, and he was as one dead, insomuch that many said, He is dead. But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up, and he arose." We feel sure as we read these words, so abounding with minuteness of description, that we have before us the narrative

of one who was on the spot, and on whose mind the whole occurrence was impressed with the utmost vividness. We feel that he has left us the story with all those features in it which produced so powerful an effect upon himself. It is no mere adaptation of St. Matthew which we are perusing : it is the work of one who was of a different character from the Publican - Apostle, and abounds with strokes of word-painting with which there is nothing comparable to be found in the writings of St. Matthew.

Of a like character is the dramatic vividness with which St. Mark brings before us all the actors in such events as it has come within his province to notice. It is not enough for him to give in indirect narration the deeds of our Lord and the incidents by which they were accompanied. He places the whole scenes before us, and gives us the direct utterances of those concerned therein. Compare St. Mark's account of the execution of the Baptist (vi. 21-27) with that of St. Matthew. It is the former alone who mentions the *convenient day*, and the feast given to the lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee, as well as *the executioner* sent to behead the prophet in his prison. But, more than this, he puts the whole transaction which led to the execution into the form of actual dialogue: "The king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask ? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in

straightway *with haste* [notice this vivifying touch of peculiarity also] unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist." Nearly the whole of these words are peculiar to St. Mark, and bespeak a very different character both of receptivity and manner of narration from the record of his fellow-Evangelist. Whether St. Mark himself had been among the disciples of the Baptist, or whether his informant was some impulsive member of the band which followed John, we cannot decide; but a perusal of this part of his record must shew us that, though the tamer story of St. Matthew might have been drawn from such a narrative as St. Mark has left, the contrary process of elaboration, and elaboration of such a kind as this would be, is inconceivable.

The same remark applies to all the descriptions which our Evangelist has given. Vividness of detail and dramatic directness of utterance are, above all things, apparent in the style of this Gospel. In the instance just quoted, St. Matthew alone could be compared, but in the account of the miraculous stilling of the tempest on the Sea of Galilee we have the parallel narrative of St. Luke as well. And the same points of difference are noticeable as before. St. Mark (iv. 35-41) alone tells us that the dismissal of the disciples occurred *when the even was come*. He alone notices the *sending away of the multitude by the disciples*, and that, when this was done, they took Jesus with them *as he was*. The mention of the *other accompanying boats* is his alone, and so are the graphic words that tell how *the waves beat into the ship*. He specifies the precise place where the Master was

sleeping,—*in the hinder part of the ship asleep on a pillow.* The speech of the disciples, couched almost in terms of reproach, “*Carest thou not that we perish?*” and the words of rebuke to the raging element, “*Peace, be still,*” are found neither in St. Luke nor St. Matthew: and all these together form instances of word-painting and dramatic realization enough of themselves to rescue this Gospel from the suspicion of being a mere compilation.

Nor are the instances just adduced isolated examples. The whole Gospel is full of them, and at the risk of tediousness, though without any attempt at being exhaustive, some of the most striking of these shall be recorded. For the frequency of such peculiarities does perhaps more than anything else in them to stamp the writer of this Gospel as an independent witness to all that he relates of the life of our Lord.

Under the head of single touches of word-painting may be cited such as follow: how the paralytic brought to Jesus was *borne of four* (ii. 3); how our Lord *looked round about with anger* on the people who came to watch whether He would heal on the Sabbath-day the man with the withered hand (iii. 5); how, when walking on the sea, *He would have passed by* the ship of his disciples (vi. 48); how he was seated *over against the treasury* when the poor widow cast in her two mites (xii. 41); and how *He called his disciples unto Him* that He might teach them the lesson to which her sacrifice was so well calculated to give point (xii. 43). Here, too, we may observe how full this Gospel is of local notices. The writer hardly ever fails to mention *where* it was,

on the way or in the house, that the events took place of which he speaks. Thus (viii. 27) it was *by the way* to the towns of Cæsarea Philippi that our Lord discoursed with his disciples of whom men said that He was. So of the conversations about his coming death (x. 32) *as they were on the way going up to Jerusalem*, and about the end of the world (xiii. 3) *as He sat upon the Mount of Olives over against the temple*. St. Mark alone records the hour of the crucifixion (xv. 25),—*and it was the third hour and they crucified him*; and also tells us (xiv. 11) of the gladness of the chief priests when they learnt that Judas would betray his master. To him alone we owe the notice (xv. 8) that *the multitude, crying aloud, began to desire Pilate to do as he had ever done unto them*. In the account of the burial of the Lord, he is singular in his mention of the boldness of Joseph of Arimathea, and of the marvel of Pilate if Christ were already dead, and of *his summons and inquiry about the matter from the Centurion* (xv. 43 44). As one vividly cognizant of all the slight details of these events he alone alludes to the *purchase* of the fine linen by Joseph (xv. 46), and of the spices for anointing the Lord's body by the women who came to the sepulchre (xvi. 1). In this last scene, too, he is like himself in mentioning that it took place *at the rising of the sun* (xvi. 2), and he makes vivid the incident by a direct record of the questioning words of the women (xvi. 3), "*Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?*" a detail which is noticed neither by the Synoptists nor by St. John.

It is worthy of mention also that St. Mark dwells

more at length and more graphically than the other Evangelists on the crowding to Christ of those who wished to be healed. Look at Chap. iii. vers. 9, 10: "And he spake to his disciples that a small boat should wait on him because of the multitude, lest they should throng him; for he had healed many, insomuch that they pressed upon him for to touch him, as many as had plagues." Then in verse 20: "And the multitude cometh together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread;" and, lower down, verse 32, the crowd is described as *sitting round about Him*. There is much more of a picture, too, in St. Mark than elsewhere when our Saviour gives (ix. 36) his lesson to the disciples against ambition. "He took a child and set him in the midst of them, and *when he had taken him in his arms* he said unto them, Whosoever," &c. Still more life-like is the description (x. 16) where the little children are brought to Jesus: "And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them." In all these cases the pictorial details are St. Mark's alone, as also in the last-quoted passage is the notice that Christ *was much displeased* with those who would have kept the children from Him.

In the narrative of the solemn entry into Jerusalem (given in Chap. xi.) touches of the same distinctive character are numerous, as in the minute description of the position of the ass and the colt which were to be brought to Jesus,—*They found the colt tied by the door without in a place where two ways met.* So it is noticed here alone that it was *when eventide was come* that Christ went away again with the Twelve to Bethany: that it was

afar off that on the next morning He beheld the barren fig-tree, and that *the time of figs was not yet*: also that the disciples *heard* the curse which Jesus pronounced against its barrenness. It is from St. Mark we learn that Christ *would not suffer that any man should carry any vessel through the temple*, and that it was *on the following morning*, as they came to Jerusalem again, that *they saw the fig-tree dried up from the roots*: a point in the narrative which is needed to explain what is meant by St. Matthew's words "and presently the fig-tree withered away," but which is utterly inconsistent with the idea that St. Mark was abridging the account given in the First Gospel.

By this Evangelist alone is it mentioned (xi. 21) that it was St. Peter who called the attention of our Lord to the prompt fulfilment of his curse, and so gave rise to the conversation which follows on the power of faith; and, quite in accordance with his custom, and his only, the writer notices (xi. 27) that it was *as Christ was walking in the temple* that the chief priests, scribes, and elders came unto Him.

A characteristic addition, and one which is of importance, as it proves that the author was writing for persons who lived during the time of the events which he relates, is to be found (xv. 21) in the mention of Simon the Cyrenian. St. Mark alone tells us that Simon was *the father of Alexander and Rufus*. Such an explanation could be of no use except to contemporaries to whom the men thus briefly indicated were well known. But while thus undesignedly pointing to the early date of the

Gospel, the addition is quite in St. Mark's manner, whom the mention of the father reminds of the sons; and they are named to give completeness to the picture that was present to his mind as he wrote.

Let us pass to fuller examples of the style of our Evangelist. Notice the word-painting in his account of the Gadarene demoniac in Chapter v. How much of the details there given are absent from St. Matthew's narrative as well as from St. Luke's! "And no man could bind him, no, not with chains; because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces, neither could any man tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones. But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him." Hardly a word of all this is in the other two Gospels, and it is difficult to understand how any but an eye-witness of the occurrence could have given such a description of it. St. Matthew's short notice of the miracle, and the somewhat longer one of St. Luke, may have been the recollections of a reported event, but St. Mark's narrative is far more than this. Whether the Evangelist himself beheld what he records, or was writing from the lips of another, the spirit of the eye-witness has infused itself into the whole narrative, leaving its mark even in such touches as the mention of the number of the swine destroyed in the waters of the Sea of Galilee. And the case is the same with almost every event to

which he refers. Not to go beyond this very Chapter v., how much more circumstantial than in the other Gospels is the story of the healing of the bloody issue, and of the raising of Jaïrus's daughter! Nowhere else are we told how *Jesus looked round about to see the woman who had touched him*, and how, beside his loving dismissal, "Go in peace," he added, for her instant comfort, "and be whole of thy plague." The description, too, of them that wept and wailed over the ruler's daughter is much more graphic (particularly in the Original), and greater reality is given to the picture by the record of the very words spoken, "Talitha cumi," and by the note which bespeaks the eye-witness, "For the damsel was *of the age of twelve years.*"

In the next Chapter (vi.) the same richness of detail is noticeable in the account of the return of the Twelve from their first mission. St. Mark is alone in noticing our Lord's anxiety for the repose of his apostles, *as there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat.* As the story proceeds with an account of the assembled crowds whom Christ immediately fed by a miracle, the unique picturesqueness of the details is more abundantly apparent: "And the people saw them departing, and many knew him and ran afoot thither out of all cities, and outwent them, and came together unto him. And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd." There follows next in greater amplitude

than elsewhere the dialogue of our Lord with his apostles about the feeding of such a crowd, and a much more graphic notice than the other Gospels furnish of the arrangement of the people to be fed, where the artist's eye of our Evangelist or his informant has alone observed and noted the *greenness* of the grass on which they were made to sit down, and that they were ranged in “*ranks*, by hundreds and by fifties,” or, as the Greek word implies, were so placed and grouped that, in their orderly arrangement and bright many-coloured garments, they looked like *flower-beds* on the green grass. We need not pursue this part of our illustration further; the reader will find the same characteristics in every Chapter, nay, within every dozen verses.

Of the writer's love for making his characters speak for themselves wherever he can do so, some notices have been already given. This feature also can be traced throughout the whole Gospel, and it will be enough if we call attention to two or three additional instances of it.

In Chap. xii. vers. 28-34 is the account of the interview of our Lord with the Scribe who came to question Him on the chief commandment in the law. St. Matthew (xxii. 34-40) has a notice of this same event, and a comparison of the two descriptions will shew at once how much more vividly the dramatic form, into which St. Mark casts his story, brings the occurrence before his readers, while indicating at the same time a more lively realization of the whole scene on the part of the narrator. Look, too, at the greater vigour which the direct language of the speakers,

as St. Mark has alone recorded it, gives to the discourse (xiii. 1 seqq.) which our Lord held with his disciples after his final departure from the Temple. "Master, see what manner of stones, and what buildings are here;" and the whole of the following verses might be quoted, if space permitted, both as apt instances of details which are peculiar to the Author of the Second Gospel and as an example of the greater vividness which his treatment of it has imparted to the history.

Enough has been said to demonstrate that there occur throughout the whole of this Gospel such tokens of independent authorship as effectually to negative the idea that its author was merely an abridger and a copyist. The graphic character of a great part of his language marks him as a recorder of independent observations, and the manner in which he has at times treated his subject is such as no mere imitator or condenser could have attained. The same peculiarities are apparent in his record of those few events which are unmentioned by the other Evangelists. In Chap. vii. vers. 31-37 the account of the cure of the deaf and dumb man, wrought as our Lord returned from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, is full of such graphic touches as we have been noticing. So, too, are those few words (xiv. 51, 52), in the scene of Christ's desertion by his disciples, which some have thought to refer to St. Mark himself: "And there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him, and he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked."

It is worth while to observe on the closing verses of this Gospel (xvi. 9–20), about the genuineness of which there has been much controversy, that in them we do not find so much of what we have pointed out as St. Mark's peculiar style as we should have expected. Perhaps in such a mere summary of our Lord's appearances after his resurrection such traces are not to be expected; yet there is hardly a passage of equal length in the whole Gospel wherein the individual characteristics of the author's style may not be detected.

We have pointed out that much of the detail which St. Mark has introduced into his Gospel could only have been gathered from an eye-witness, some of it only from a disciple who was among the first whom Christ called. Whether an examination of such language of St. Peter as is recorded in the other Gospels, and in the Acts, would lead us to the conclusion that *he* was the informant from whose observation our Evangelist drew his descriptions is a very interesting inquiry, but one on which we cannot now enter. It would also be profitable to investigate in this light the language of St. Peter's Epistles, and such investigation might add something to the evidence of the genuineness of the second of those Epistles, in which there is certainly no lack of graphic features such as we have been considering. But such an inquiry is not for this time.

We cannot, however, conclude without observing that the freshness of all the details which occur in this Gospel, is such as to carry it back to a very early date. Even to an eye-witness, slight points, well impressed on the mind at first, soon become

confused and indistinct. The very minute peculiarities which abound in St. Mark's Gospel force on us the conclusion either that it was the earliest written of all the Gospels, or that the notes from which St. Mark drew his information had been recorded very near to the time when each event took place. In either case we possess in this book the record which, of all the New Testament writings, is most nearly contemporary with our Lord's life.

But this remark is made by the way. The object of the present inquiry has been answered if the independent authorship of St. Mark's Gospel has been made plainer by it. For if it has been sufficiently shewn that the writer who so preferred, as St. Mark did, direct to indirect narration, was one who had vividly realized for himself the events which he records, and, while speaking of the same matters as the other Evangelists, betrays in every page his own individuality; that, so far from abridging what he has given us, he, in most cases, expands it, and that in a most striking manner, and in such wise as no mere copyist or compiler would have been able or have ventured to do: and that he writes in such a way, knowing that his composition would come under the inspection of persons who were contemporary with the events which he describes, we can have little doubt that the conclusion of the reader will be that the Gospel of St. Mark is no compilation, but an original, and it may be the earliest, record of the life of Christ.

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