

## A SURVEY OF THE SYNOPTIC QUESTION.<sup>1</sup>

### I. RECENT LITERATURE.

THE last two or three years have seen an increased activity in the criticism of the Gospels in both its branches—as concerned with the Synoptic Gospels, and as concerned with the Gospel of St. John. We here in England may claim a certain share in this activity. We can point to at least one substantial work dealing with the Fourth Gospel (Archdeacon Watkins' *Bampton Lectures*); and on the Synoptics we have more than one which makes up for want of scale by freshness or intelligence of treatment. On the Continent several important works have appeared, not only by writers of established reputation coming back to a familiar theme, but also by others whose names are comparatively new in connexion with these subjects. Both in regard to the first three Gospels, and in regard to the Fourth Gospel, the present seems an appropriate time for taking a survey of the general position.

In attempting this, I propose to follow the usual division by taking the Synoptic group separately. I do this in spite of a protest from one of the writers whom I am just about to mention (Dr. P. Ewald). The protest was justified, and it is well that it should have been made. The division rests only to a limited extent on a real distinction in the nature of things. It is with this as with

<sup>1</sup> It is proposed to treat this subject in four papers under the following heads:—(1) "Recent Literature"; (2) and (3) "Points Proved or Probable"; (4) "New Hypotheses." It is hoped that the series of papers on the Synoptic Gospels may be followed by a similar series on the Gospel of St. John.

so many other subjects, in which something is perforce lost by separating what ought to go together. But if we do not forget the cross-relations which are woven backwards and forwards between this half of the subject and that, if we keep reminding ourselves that the division is primarily one of convenience, then I do not think that it will lead us very far wrong. Convenient at least it is to break up our subject in this way, especially as the present position of things at which I am looking suggests in each case a different leading idea and a different mode of treatment.

I place therefore the Synoptic Gospels first; and I begin by a roll-call of the works of which I shall have to speak. They are as follows :

The Rev. J. Estlin Carpenter: *The Synoptic Gospels* (full title, *The First Three Gospels: Their Origin and Relations*). (London, 1890.)

The Rev. A. Wright: *The Composition of the Four Gospels*. (London and New York, 1890.)

Professor J. T. Marshall: article in *THE EXPOSITOR* for July, 1890, entitled, "Did St. Paul use a Semitic Gospel?"

Dr. P. Ewald: *Das Hauptproblem der Evangelienfrage und der Weg zu seiner Lösung*. (Leipzig, 1890.)

Dr. A. Resch: *Agrapha (Aussercanonische Evangelienfragmente)*, being Band v. of Gebhardt and Harnack's "Texte und Untersuchungen." (Leipzig, 1889.)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since the above list was in type there has come into my hands another important monograph on the "Quotations from the Gospels in Justin Martyr in their Bearing upon the Criticism of the Gospels" (*Die Evangelienzitate Justins des Märtyrers in ihrem Wert für die Evangelienkritik*), by Wilhelm Bousset (Göttingen, 1891). The inclusion of this work would only tend to strengthen the position taken up in the essay. The author, who writes with conspicuous independence and freedom from apologetic tendency, expressly states his adhesion to the Two-Document Hypothesis; and he comes in part, at least, to the same result as Dr. Resch. He believes that, besides our present Gospels, Justin had direct access to one of the original documents out of which those Gospels were constructed.

I do not include in this list the Rev. J. J. Halcombe's *Historic Relation of the Gospels* (London, 1889), because if it were treated at all, it would have to be treated separately; and because, in spite of many scholarly qualities, it seems to me to pursue a line of argument which can only end in disappointment.

A few words of introductory characterization will prepare us to consider more closely the argument of the books before us. It fell to me to speak of Mr. Estlin Carpenter's volume in *THE EXPOSITOR* for last month. His sketch of the results of Synoptic criticism is based upon an intelligent estimate of English and Continental opinion, not without some first-hand study. In Mr. Wright's little book there was of necessity more of the latter than of the former, as it was written at sea, with no other help than that of the *Synopticon* and Westcott and Hort's *Greek Testament*. At the same time acknowledgments are made to Dr. E. A. Abbott, Dr. Bernhard Weiss, and the two Cambridge Bishops of Durham. More will be said about Mr. Wright's theory in subsequent papers, but in the meantime recognition is due to this vigorous attempt to realize and reproduce the circumstances under which the Gospels were actually composed. The author has certainly written "with his eye upon the object." What he gives us is no mere repetition of other people's views, but a conception, freshly and strongly formed, of his own. It has the good fault of erring on the side of definiteness. Sometimes the effect of this is rather quaint. Mr. Wright knows the ins and outs of his friends the catechists' proceedings more intimately than most of us. Here, for instance, is a passage :

"Clement of Alexandria tells us that S. Matthew was a vegetarian, like S. James, the Lord's brother. This fact may have increased his hold on the esteem of the Church at Jerusalem. But his apostolical office must have brought him to the front after S. Peter's withdrawal. And thus he may, not only have continued to give his own new lessons, but he may well have exercised a general superintendence over the

catechists, and perhaps assisted them in the important work of piecing the two cycles together to form one compact course of instruction for practical use; for the second cycle appears never to have been written down separately, or to have formed a perfect work by itself.

“When the task was but half completed, there came the demand for catechists to teach in those Gentile Churches which S. Paul was founding; for S. Mark had turned back from the work, and others must be had to take his place. Such teachers might no doubt have been obtained at Antioch; but it is evident that S. Paul drew his main supply of evangelists and catechists from the energetic, proselytizing Church at Jerusalem, or his converts would not so soon have been tinged with Judaism. [P]

“These missionary catechists took with them the course of instruction then current. That is to say, they took the first cycle [*i.e.*, in Mr. Wright’s view, the teaching of S. Peter], in a form by no means so much curtailed as it afterwards became in the East. And intermingled with it they took such parts of the second cycle [the teaching of S. Matthew] as had been completed. Thus the later portions of the second cycle, except a few fragments carried from time to time by occasional visitors, never reached the West, and accordingly cannot be found in St. Luke’s Gospel. For communication between the East and the West was not encouraged in later time, S. Paul preferring to educate local catechists for his own use, rather than run the risk of occasionally introducing a ‘false brother.’” [P]<sup>1</sup>

We may remark in passing, that Mr. Wright’s whole theory is the nearest English counterpart to that put forward in Germany by Wetzel, of which some account was given by Dr. Edersheim in the first volume of *Studia Biblica*. The central feature of both is the systematic lecturing which they assume—systematic at least in its machinery, if not exactly in the course of instruction given. I cannot but think that both writers postulate too much under this head. Although it is true that some catechists probably did give instruction in the facts of the life of Christ, they had much else to occupy them: the fulfilment of prophecy and proofs from the Old Testament; simple moral teaching like that of the “Two Ways,” or first part of the *Didaché*; practical directions for the life and worship of

<sup>1</sup> *Composition of the Gospels*, p. 62 f.

Christian communities, such as are found in the latter part of that treatise. Least of all can I suppose that there was any deliberate training—almost a college, with St. Peter or St. Matthew at its head—for sending out relays of qualified instructors, as both writers seem to suppose. Other difficulties in Mr. Wright's scheme I shall have to mention later; but my principal object was to call attention to the realism of his descriptions, the earnestness with which he has thrown himself into his own theory, and worked it out in concrete detail; in a word, what the Germans would call *Pragmatismus* by which his book is characterized.

Readers of THE EXPOSITOR will still have fresh in their memory Professor Marshall's paper which was placed third on our list.<sup>1</sup> Unhappily the present writer, whose acquaintance with theology dates back from a time when there were no honour schools or triposes in that subject, has "wisdom at one entrance quite shut out" in regard to it by his ignorance of Hebrew. So far as one can judge who is thus disqualified, he would say that the value of Professor Marshall's paper is not at all to be measured by its brevity. The points selected for treatment, though few, are striking, and appear to be deserving of close attention. In order fully to appreciate this paper, it needs to be set in its place, as we shall shortly attempt to set it, among other recent investigations. The author himself hardly appears to be conscious of the many points of contact which his argument has with these—more particularly with the elaborate and learned work of Dr. Resch. This work, which is styled by its author *Agrapha*, is primarily a collection of sayings of our Lord which are supposed to have been quoted from

<sup>1</sup> It will be understood that, when this was penned, I was not aware that Mr. Marshall was projecting the further series of papers begun in the last number of THE EXPOSITOR. It is also hardly necessary to say that the coincidence between the end of this essay and the first of Mr. Marshall's is wholly undesigned. Our paths will diverge more in later numbers, though we may perhaps have the opportunity for a little mutual criticism.

lost—not apocryphal—Gospels. But it is also a first instalment of what is practically a new and independent theory of the origin of the Gospels. This we shall have presently to state and examine. In the meantime it may suffice to say that if there are features in the theory which one is tempted at first sight to put aside as too unpromising for discussion, one is precluded from doing this by the accumulated marks of genuine first-hand work which the book exhibits. Dr. Resch tells us that the publications which he is now beginning are the fruit of five and twenty years of labour; and it is obvious that work so thorough and so coherent cannot lightly be disregarded.

Dr. Resch writes with the enthusiasm, and with something of the sanguine temper, of a discoverer. In this he resembles—though with a certain difference—the other German writer whom I have named along with him. Dr. Paul Ewald—not to be identified with the palæographer of the same name, who was associated with the late Gustav Loewe in editing a well-known volume of facsimiles of Visigothic MSS.—is, I believe, a young professor who has recently entered upon his office at Leipzig. His inaugural lecture, delivered in 1887, was published last year, buttressed round by excursions amounting to six times its bulk, under the title *Das Hauptproblem der Evangelienfrage*. The “main problem” which Dr. Ewald sets himself to solve is, how to account for the differences between the first three Gospels and the Fourth. Dr. Ewald will not do this by the easy method often had recourse to of simply throwing overboard the latter. On the contrary, he asserts and defends the genuineness of the Fourth Gospel, and he turns round the question, and points it in a direction which is really the opposite to that which it usually takes. Assuming the substantial truth of the Johannean tradition, he asks himself how to account for the apparent absence of so much of it from the Synoptics. In the course of this inquiry he is led

to state his views on the origin and composition of these Gospels; so that on both sides we shall meet him, at once in our present sketch of the position of Synoptic criticism, and also later when we come to speak of St. John. Dr. Ewald too is a writer who will have decidedly to be reckoned with. He is another of the vigorous workers whom Germany produces in such numbers. And if there is something of youth in the emphasis with which he writes, which might perhaps bear toning down with advantage, it springs at least from the consciousness of thorough study and the strength of honest conviction.

In the literature which I have been describing there is more than one coincidence which seems to me to point to the opening—perhaps only for a time—of what may be called a new phase in the criticism of the Synoptic Gospels. Hypotheses are put forward in such a way as to demand a hearing, which a few years ago would have been thought altogether too paradoxical. We shall have to take up and consider these hypotheses before we have done. But the opportunity may perhaps first be taken to cast a glance backwards as well as forwards, to adjust our bearings in reference to the past, before we decide how our helm is to point in the future. Do the works of which I have been speaking indicate any progress? Is there any solid advance to be recorded apart from the mere ebb and flow of opinion?

The solution of all great critical problems moves slowly. There seems to be an immense expenditure of labour for little positive result. For years, nay, for generations together, there will seem to be only a wilderness of mutually contradictory theories. It is only after a long and painful struggle, in which advance and retrogression will seem to succeed each other, that the tangle is thinned, a clearing effected here and there, and that roads begin to be driven through the thicket which will be extended until they meet

in the end. The moral is, that a sound argument cannot be drawn from these differences, especially in the early stages of an inquiry. Differences, contradictions, hypotheses even diametrically opposed to each other, are what, in the nature of things, we must expect. We may be sure that they will not last for ever. Even a negative result is a result. To disprove the false is a real step towards the establishment of the true. By degrees the confusion becomes less, and order is introduced—at first it may be in some quite outlying section, disconnected as it seems from the rest. But order in one section is soon followed by order in another; and the rate of progress is gradually accelerated.

Of course opinions will differ as to the outlook of any one subject at any given time. And yet there is reason to think that a number of biblical problems are nearing the stage when a glimmer of daylight begins to show itself among them. The daylight may still be very partial; it may be only a faint streak along the horizon; the clouds may come up again and cover it: and yet it *is* daylight, the harbinger of morning and of day.

Among the problems which are thus trembling on the verge of discovery—not of final and complete discovery, which no doubt may still be long in coming, but of the first beginnings of a real solution,—I believe that we may count this Synoptic problem as one. We cannot wonder at the delay; for I doubt if in the whole range of literature there is another question which involves data so complicated, so minute, and to all appearance so conflicting. To find the hidden unity which shall reconcile these is indeed a difficult task.

Practically we may say that the Synoptic problem has been before the world in its modern form for about a hundred years. If we look back over those hundred years we shall see a number of landmarks mapping out the course



which it has taken. The starting-point is Eichhorn's theory of a *Protevanangelium* (1794), essentially right in its assumption of a common original source for our three Gospels, though wrong in its artificial construction of intermediate steps between the original Gospels and the Gospels as we have them. At the opposite pole to Eichhorn would be Schleiermacher's theory of *Diegeses* (1817), according to which the earliest stage in the history of the Gospels was not marked by any single document, but by aggregates of floating narrative, which by degrees were combined into larger wholes. Among these hypothetical aggregates, that which has established itself most permanently is the "Collection of Discourses" by St. Matthew, which Schleiermacher elicited from the evidence of Papias (1832). In strict order of time (1789-90), anterior both to Eichhorn and Schleiermacher, was Griesbach's enforcement of the view, which made our St. Mark an epitome not only (as St. Augustine held) of St. Matthew, but of the two companion Gospels. This theory exercised an important influence over subsequent speculations, determining amongst others the order assigned to the Gospels by Baur, although it has been, I think, rightly remarked, that this alone of all the theories on the subject, not only is not true in itself, but does not even contain an element of truth. In 1818 Gieseler put forward another theory, deriving our Gospels, not from any common document, but from a common base in oral tradition, in which he too has had a long line of followers, and which is even yet most in favour in some conservative quarters. For twenty years the factors so far assumed were combined by different writers in different proportions, more attention being given to the statements of Papias. The most noticeable event is then the reaction in favour of St. Mark as against Griesbach's hypothesis, at the head of which might be placed the works of Weisse and Wilke, both of which appeared in the same year (1838).

We are thus brought to the Tübingen period of Baur, Zeller, and Schwegler, the characteristics of which are well known. The path of literary criticism was now deserted, and the peculiar relations between the Gospels were explained as due rather to the theological leanings (*tendenz*) of the writers. Foremost among the opponents of Baur was Ewald (1849); but the next larger period is best dated from the close and searching work of Holtzmann (*Die Synoptischen Evangelien*, 1863). Holtzmann decisively brought back the debate into the channel of literary criticism from which Baur had disturbed it, though the considerations on which Baur laid, as we can now see exaggerated, stress can never again be lost sight of. From 1863 onwards the methods of inquiry have not noticeably altered; for heirs to the Tübingen tradition like Hilgenfeld and Keim largely modified their views in this direction, and the return to a more extreme position by Holsten (in *Die drei ursprünglichen noch ungeschriebenen Evangelien*, 1883) met with little approval and no imitators. On the other hand, a number of very solid works, conspicuous among which I would name those by Weiss and Wendt, are constructed upon lines which do not diverge widely from Holtzmann.<sup>1</sup> At the same time Holtzmann has made a number of concessions which have brought him nearer to his fellow workers in the subject.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of this chain of evolution come the five works which I have named above. One of them, Professor Marshall's essay, makes no direct statement on the wider question of the origin of the Gospels. The single allusion which he makes to this, dating St. Luke's Gospel from the imprisonment of St. Paul at Cæsarea, in the years 58-60, is an opinion which I cannot believe to be tenable.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Weiss, *Das Marcus-Evangelium*, 1872; *Das Matthäus-Evangelium und seine Lucas-parallelen*, 1876; *Einleitung*, 1886. Wendt, *Die Lehre Jesu*, 1886.

<sup>2</sup> See his *Einleitung*, p. 339, first edition, 1885.

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Halcombe goes a step further than Professor Marshall: he thinks that

other books all imply some form of the Synoptic theory; and it is a satisfaction to find that they all imply substantially the same. The common postulate of Mr. Carpenter and Mr. Wright in England, and of Dr. Ewald and Dr. Resch in Germany, is what is usually called the Two-Document Hypothesis; *viz.* the hypothesis that at the root of our three Synoptics there lie two main documents, a narrative by St. Mark composed from the preaching of St. Peter, and a collection of our Lord's discourses first put together by St. Matthew. It will be seen at once—and it is no small argument in support of the theory—that it is just two such documents as these to the existence of which Papias, in the first quarter of the second century, bears express testimony. It is now generally agreed that it would not be safe to base a theory of the origin of the Synoptics on Papias alone: but the investigations of which we have been speaking have all been conducted independently of Papias, and all conducted also independently of each other; so that when they are found to converge towards a conclusion with which the language of Papias is so easily reconcilable, the coincidence must needs carry great weight with it.

At the present moment there can be little doubt that this Two-Document Hypothesis holds the field. It is however a complex hypothesis, consisting of a number of parts which do not all stand upon the same footing; and in the next paper I shall do my best to distinguish between them, and estimate what appear to be the several degrees of probability attaching to them, so as in some measure to define those lines of investigation on which most has been already done, and also those on which most remains to do.

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St. John's Gospel was written first, and St. Luke's last, and that *all four Gospels* "must have been in general circulation before the Acts of the Apostles," *i.e.* before the year 62 or 63. (*Historic Relation, etc.*, p. 235).