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THE INJUNCTIONS OF SILENCE IN THE GOSPELS.

IT is now some two years since there appeared one of those elaborate monographs¹, so characteristic of German theology, presenting an entirely new and original argument, which if it had held good would have had far-reaching consequences. To understand the bearing of this argument it is necessary briefly to glance at a point in the criticism of the Synoptic Gospels which seems to have won very general acceptance.

The great majority of those who have studied the subject are agreed that the Gospel of St Mark, or a writing extremely like our present Gospel, if not necessarily the oldest of such writings that have come down to us, is yet the common basis of the three Synoptic Gospels. The other writers, whom we know as St Matthew and St Luke, made use of this Gospel, and derived from it the large element which is common to all three, and which is the more important because it gave that outline of our Lord's public ministry, beginning with the Baptism and ending with the Crucifixion and Resurrection, with which we are most familiar.

It would be too much to say that the sequence of events as they are given in this Gospel is in all respects strictly chronological. In more than one instance it would seem that the smaller sections of narration are grouped together not in order of time, but because of a certain resemblance in their subject-matter. But taken as a whole, the order of the narratives in

¹ *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*, by W. Wrede, Göttingen, 1901.

St Mark's Gospel, which in this may be identified with the common foundation of the three Gospels, is excellent, and presents an evolution of the history which is both harmonious in itself and probably represents in the main the real course of the events.

The narrative, as I have said, begins with the Baptism and ends with the Crucifixion and Resurrection. In the intervening period there is a clearly-marked climax at the Transfiguration. Up to that point there is a steady ascent which culminates in the confession of St Peter; down from it there is in like manner a descent which finds characteristic expression in the predictions of the approaching Passion, Death, and Resurrection, which begin from the same point, in close connexion with St Peter's confession and the Transfiguration.

Another special feature of St Mark's Gospel, which has also passed from it to some extent into the other Gospels, is the peculiar air of mystery and secrecy which is thrown over certain aspects of our Lord's career—His marked reserve in putting forward His Messianic claims; the double character of His teaching, and more particularly of His parables, at once so simple in outward form and so baffling to those who sought really to understand them; and a like strangely double character in the miracles, which on the one hand are wrought in rather considerable numbers, and on the other hand, we might say almost frequently are accompanied by an express command that they are not to be made known, or at least not published abroad. And lastly there is a similar injunction of silence in regard to the predictions of suffering, death, and rising again.

It was impossible for a student of the Gospels to avoid noticing these points, which clearly hang together, though the connexion between them might not appear on the surface. Most of those who have made the attempt to write a Life of Christ have been content to take them as they stand, and indeed to accept all this part of the outline which St Mark gives of our Lord's public ministry as strictly historical.

And indeed I will venture to say that all these features in the narrative are not only strictly but beautifully historical. Whether we see their full significance or not, there is just that paradoxical touch about them which is the sure guarantee of truth. What

writer of fiction, especially of the naïve fiction current in those days, would ever have thought of introducing such features, with just that kind of seeming self-contradiction? I repeat: even if we could not at once understand all that is meant by these subtle oppositions, I think we should not fail to see in them something strikingly lifelike and individual, quite beyond the reach of invention.

That, I cannot but think, will be the feeling of most of us. But what no one (to the best of my belief) has ever done before, that Professor Wrede of Breslau, in the monograph to which I began by referring, has now done. He has called in question the truth of all this delicate portraiture. I will not prejudge the manner in which he has done this; but I will begin with a brief sketch of the argument as he states it.

The main point is this. If Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be the Messiah, He would not have gone about preventing His followers from publishing that claim. If He wrought miracles in support of it, He would not have enjoined secrecy on those upon whom they had been wrought. The two things would neutralize each other. It would be futile to tell some few individuals to keep silence if there were many others who received no such command of silence.

The truth, Wrede maintains, is that Jesus of Nazareth did not during His lifetime put Himself forward as the Messiah at all. The whole structure of the narrative which makes Him do so is built not on a basis of fact but on the belief of the Early Church. After the Resurrection the disciples came to believe that Christ was God, and they read back this belief into the history of His life. They found themselves confronted with the fact that He had not claimed to be the Messiah while He was alive, and had consequently not given proofs of His Messiahship. To confess the fact would have been fatal to the dogma which they had come to believe; and therefore they tried to conceal it by inventing these injunctions of silence. When they were asked by those who knew what the course of the life of Jesus had really been, why He had not shewn Himself to be the supernatural being that they claimed, their reply was that He really had shewn it in a number of ways, but that He had prevented these proofs from having their full effect by repeatedly commanding

both His own more immediate disciples and others to abstain from publishing what He was and much that He had done.

I do not know how it will appear to others, but I confess that to me this theory seems unreal and artificial in the extreme. That any ancient should seek to cover the non-existence of certain presumed facts by asserting that they did exist, but that the persons affected were compelled to keep silence about them, is a hypothesis altogether too far-fetched to be credible.

We observe, by the way, that on this theory an enormous weight is thrown upon the Resurrection. It was the Resurrection which gave rise to that belief in the Divinity of Christ which then coloured the conception of the whole of the preceding history. And yet, on the hypothesis, the Resurrection had nothing to lead up to it. It had never been predicted. Before it occurred the Lord had not given Himself out as the Messiah, and still less as the Son of God. Many, at least, of the mighty works attributed to Him were pure invention. It is really one incredible thing heaped upon another. The founding of Christianity was in any case a very great and wonderful event ; and yet it is thought that it can be explained by reducing the cause of it almost to nothing.

Wrede's book, although no review that I have seen accepts any great part of it, has yet made more impression upon opinion in Germany than I believe that it deserves. My chief reason for referring to it is that it calls attention to an aspect of our Lord's life which does present something of a problem. What account are we to give of these paradoxical injunctions of silence? That they are true I have not the slightest doubt. That they are an important feature in the picture we are to form for ourselves, I have also no doubt. But what are we to think was their reason and purpose?

I am not sure that I am altogether able to say. But in any case I conceive that this feature of our Lord's ministry must be connected with that side of it which was a fulfilment of the prophet's words, 'My Servant shall not strive, nor cry, nor lift up His voice in the streets'. In any case it must be connected with the recasting of the Messianic idea which our Lord certainly carried out, divesting it of its associations with political action and transforming it from a kingdom of this world to a kingdom of God and of the Spirit.

We must try to realize the circumstances; for we may be very sure that the state of things with which we are treating is no embodiment of an abstract idea as Wrede supposes, but intensely concrete, arising out of the collision of different and conflicting motives in the Teacher and the taught.

On the side of our Lord Himself we must bear in mind His deliberate purpose to work for the redemption of Israel, but not in the way in which Israel expected to be redeemed. There was to be no flash of swords, no raising of armies, no sudden and furious onset with the Messiah Himself in the van. It was beginning to be more and more clear that the end of His ministry was not to be victory in the sense of what was commonly accounted victory. The Messiah saw opening out before Him a valley, but it was the valley of the shadow of death, and death itself stood at the end. He was preparing to descend into this valley, not like a warrior, with garments rolled in blood, but like a lamb led to the slaughter, with a supreme effort of resignation, as one who when he was reviled reviled not again.

This is the picture that we have on the Lord's side; and then on the side of those for whom He fought and for whom He worked His miracles we remember that there was a spirit the very opposite of this; eager young men, full of courage and enthusiasm, ready to take the sword, ready at any moment to rise against the Romans, waiting only for a leader. Ever since the dethronement of Archelaus and the annexation of Judaea by Rome in A.D. 6 there had been this temper of sullen acquiescence biding its time. The memory of the Maccabean rising still lived in men's minds, and of the wonderful feats that had then been wrought against desperate odds. What then might not be done with a prophet at the head—nay, one more than a prophet, who was assured of the alliance and succour of Heaven?

There is a significant story in the Fourth Gospel, a story that bears upon its face the stamp of verisimilitude, much as such marks are overlooked by a criticism that has too much vogue at the present time. After the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus, 'perceiving that they were about to come and take Him by force, to make Him King, withdrew again into the mountain Himself alone' (John vi 15). He constantly had to avoid this kind of pressure. It was in full keeping with this

that He had on several occasions to check the zeal of those who would have hailed Him as the Messiah, and to impose silence upon those on whom His miracles had been wrought. Enthusiasm always lay ready to His hand. It could have been fanned into flame with the greatest ease. But it was enthusiasm of the wrong sort; it needed to be enlightened, disciplined, purified; and therefore it was that the Lord refused to give it the encouragement it sought. Hence these seeming cross-purposes, this alternate stimulus and restraint.

Unfortunately we have few details. At the distance of time at which our Gospels were composed, it was hardly possible that we should have them. If we had, much that is now obscure might have been made plain. We might have come to understand the special conditions at work in particular scenes, at one time favouring publicity, at another privacy. We may be sure that our Lord diagnosed with perfect insight the temper of those with whom He had to deal, and adjusted His own attitude to it, like a good physician, adapting His treatment to each case as it arose.

We must recognize that our Gospels speak for the most part in very general terms. Especially the accounts of wholesale miracle-working are subject to deductions for historical perspective. It is remarkable that the Gospels have preserved to the extent they have the instances in which the finger of silence is laid upon the lips of those who were eager to speak.

But I am quite prepared to believe that these instances have a yet deeper meaning than I have as yet suggested for them. I always desire to speak with great reserve of the human consciousness of our Lord. I cannot at all agree with those writers who would treat of this as something that can be entirely known and freely handled; and still less when they eke out the limited data supplied by the Gospels from the Messianic expectations of the time. But where the Gospels themselves clearly emphasize a point, we also shall do right to emphasize it. And it is to be noted that where the Gospels speak of these injunctions of silence their language is constantly emphatic: 'Jesus rebuked (*ἐπετίμησεν*) the unclean spirit, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him' (Mk. i 25); 'And He charged them much (*πολλὰ ἐπετίμα αὐτοῖς*) that they should not make Him known' (Mk. iii 12; cf. viii 39);

'And He charged them much (*δισετέλατο αὐτοῖς πολλά*) that no man should know this' (Mk. v 43; cf. vii 36, ix 9).

I have given only a few typical passages; there are several others similar. In all of these the language is the same; it is the language of emotion—of strong emotion. How is this? I think perhaps we shall understand it best if we take these passages along with yet another, which naturally goes with them, and in which indeed they may be said to reach a climax. In the Gospel it follows immediately upon St Peter's confession. Then we have the first prediction of the Passion and the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. We are told that our Lord 'spake the saying openly. And Peter took Him, and began to rebuke Him. But He, turning about, and seeing His disciples, rebuked Peter, and saith, Get thee behind Me, Satan: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men' (Mk. viii 32 f.). In St Matthew it is stronger still, though the added clause is probably only editorial: 'Get thee behind Me, Satan: thou art an offence [a stumbling-block or scandal] unto Me: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men' (Mt. xvi 23).

Words like these come up from the depths. They are not the calm enunciation of a policy, or the didactic imparting of a lesson. Such things are cold, and words like these are not cold. They are spoken—if I may speak as we might speak of one of ourselves—with heat. It is really the reaction against temptation, felt—and keenly felt—as temptation.

Our Lord goes so far as to identify Peter with the very tempter himself. The apostle spake in the innocence of his heart; thoughtlessly, and with the vehemence of short-sighted affection, but with no evil intent. But in his hasty speech a poisoned dart lay concealed, a dart cunningly aimed at the whole purpose of the Lord's mission.

We are reminded indeed of that of which we commonly speak as 'the Temptation'. There the story is told in a symbolical form, which perhaps gathers up the significance of more than one actual incident in our Lord's life. He is conscious of supernatural power—of power that might have been wielded for other ends than those for which it was really given. When the Son of Man saw, as He might have seen from a lofty mountain, a broad

and typical expanse, as it were a sample of the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, He saw what was entirely within His grasp if He had cared to take it. But to take it would have meant abandoning the whole line of ministry that He had marked out for Himself. 'Whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am in the midst of you as he that serveth' (Lk. xxii 27). It was no common form of service that our Lord had chosen. 'He became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.' It was the shadow of the Cross that now fell upon Him. And it is very clear that the prospect carried with it a temptation. 'O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from Me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt' (Mt. xxvi 39). In that prayer the temptation was finally repelled; but we may be sure that it had been felt before. It was especially felt at the moment when St Peter made his unhappy impulsive speech, doing, without knowing it, the devil's work.

We speak of the remodelling of the Messianic idea; and it is absolutely true that our Lord was the Messiah in a very different sense from that in which the name was understood by His contemporaries. But this again was no change worked out, as it were, on paper; it was no product of philosophy, speculative or practical. It was a conflict—if indeed that is the right name, for again I am speaking after the manner of men—fought out deep down, at the lowest depth at which such conflicts are fought, and extending all the way from the first moments after the Baptism to the last bitter cry upon the Cross. Beneath what seemed at times the quiet unruffled surface of that life the conflict was going on, and such scenes as those which we have been passing in rapid review are times when the fires within break forth and are seen.

These scenes were not merely the expression of what we should call an idiosyncrasy of character; they were not merely incidents in a process of education, either of the inner circle of the disciples or of the outer circle of inquirers and sympathizers. They were in some degree, I conceive, both these things; but their origin lay deeper. They were surface indications of the only inward antithesis of which we have any trace in the life of our Lord. He Himself described it as an antithesis between 'the

things of God ' and ' the things of men ' . That tender Humanity shrank—as how should it not?—from the terrible end that was so clearly foreseen : an end the terrors of which were enhanced and not diminished by the fact that He who foresaw them was the Son of God. The human mind of Jesus shrank from this ; it had doubtless dreams and imaginations of its own, of winning the whole world in other and less dreadful ways. A lifted finger, a breathed wish, and twelve legions of angels would have been at His side. Only one thought hindered—but that a master-thought : How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled that thus it must be ? Behind the Scriptures lay the will of Him who gave them, that will in regard to which Father and Son were at one.

We see the antithesis—the conflict, if so it is to be called. But, the Son being what He was, it could have but one issue. It issued in an agony over which we draw a veil. We draw a veil over it, and we turn away ; but, as we turn, we say to ourselves ' So much it cost to redeem the race of man ' .

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