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Christian Traditions: Their Value and their Channels.

"I HAVE read somewhere a reputed saying of the Saviour, and whether some one attributed it to Him, or remembered it, I query whether it is genuine." So remarked Origen, suggesting two tests for any reputed fact—it must be repeated by credible people, it must be intrinsically credible. His critical faculty had been trained in Alexandria, a factory of literature, which sometimes challenged attention on its own merits, sometimes claimed a respectable origin. He knew several semi-Christian Gospels and Acts, and occasionally cited a sentence from them; but said broadly that their authors undertook their task rashly without the needful gifts of grace. He was evidently ready to admit that they might contain a real fact here and there, but he expected both external evidence and internal probability, before accepting any.

When he reached Palestine, he was in close touch with Jews, who had long considered the question of tradition, and had come to the conclusion that nothing was to be accepted unless every link in the chain was known, and guaranteed in character. The Mishna was a collection of trustworthy traditions, in gathering which Rabbi Aqiba had been prominent. One of these is that Rabbi Eliezer was told at Sepphoris by Jacob of Kephar Sekhanya that Jesus of Nazareth expounded Micah i. 7, (Of the hire of a harlot hath she gathered them, and unto the hire of a harlot shall they return) as meaning, "From filth it came, to the place of filth it shall go."

That is the one saying attributed to our Lord which has a guaranteed pedigree, outside Christian circles. Muslims inherited the sense that a tradition is not to be considered, unless the chain of its transmitters is known; this was illustrated by Miss McLean in these pages last July. We propose now to apply the principle not only to reputed sayings of the Lord, but to other alleged happenings of apostolic days. When we can trace a statement being copied, we often note that it gains in detail; every embellishment must be discarded unless its own pedigree can be traced.

We shall be content when the first link is of the apostolic age, and shall not go into minute criticism of the synoptic gospels. It will suffice to notice that the importance of accurate

information and accurate transmission was recognized from the first. Paul declared that he had received from the Lord several things that he had told the Corinthians; and in relation to conduct he emphasized to the Thessalonians that tradition might be either oral or written. Timothy was bidden hand on to another generation what he had heard, that this tradition might be further transmitted. The epistle to the Hebrews was avowedly by one of the second generation, who relied on what he had been told by actual hearers of the Lord. Luke contrasted the procedure of some narrators with his own; he offered certainty because he had carefully enquired from eye-witnesses and ministers of the word.

More than a hundred anecdotes or sayings of the Lord are found outside the New Testament; most of them have no vouchers at all. A very few, in the gospels according to the Hebrews and according to the Egyptians, can be traced up to Julius Cassianus; as he flourished more than a century after Christ, he is no good witness. For the others we will work downwards, not upwards.

Clement, writing from Rome about A.D. 95, says that Paul reached the farthest bounds of the West; that the apostles, preaching everywhere in country and town, appointed their first converts, when they had tested them, to be bishops and deacons; and further, that they provided a continuance so that on their death other tested men should succeed. While the letter was probably penned by Clement, it went as a letter of the church at Rome, and for these statements is good evidence.

A sermon which used to be attributed to Clement, makes no such claim, and opinions differ both as to its date and as to its place. Under these circumstances, two sayings here attributed to the Lord have no guarantee.

Another anonymous work has been entitled, The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, but it makes no such claim for itself. The "testing" of which Paul had spoken was now very necessary, and the tests to be applied are mentioned, they are almost entirely of moral conduct. Nothing fresh is given as a tradition. Rather it is admitted that prophets may still appear, speaking with direct inspiration.

Such a prophet was Ignatius of Antioch. As he was also bishop of a church founded in apostolic days, he was in a position to hand on much tradition. Seven letters of his survive, which were at once collected and circulated by Polycarp of Smyrna. He was deeply concerned with sound teaching, and with a certain pattern of church government. Yet never once does he appeal to tradition. He refers to a written gospel, evidently Matthew; and to the apostles, which apparently mean Paul and the

"Teaching" just referred to. Once he did profess to speak by inspiration, but twice he contrasts his own advocacy with the ordinances of apostles—which unfortunately he does not specify.

In the letter of Polycarp to Philippi, covering copies of the letters of Ignatius, his only appeal to authority is to Paul, Peter, John and our Lord as reported in the synoptics; never to tradition.

There is an anonymous letter, whose date and place are uncertain; called the Epistle of Barnabas; its author disclaims being even an authoritative teacher, laying stress only on ordinances of the Lord. These are summed in a section closely akin to the anonymous Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. Of any other tradition there is no hint.

We come at last to a man who, sending a fine appeal that Diognetus will accept Jesus as his Saviour, distinctly claims to be a disciple of apostles as well as a teacher of the nations, passing on lessons handed down to him. He is little concerned with externals, emphasizing that it is only through the grace of the eternal Word that "the faith of the gospels is established and the tradition of the apostles is preserved." He only quotes a single sentence from an apostle, but he re-states apostolic doctrine most attractively, without any addition.

Next we come to a man who was an assiduous, if uncritical, collector of traditions, Papias of Hierapolis. His main work was to expound the Oracles of the Lord, but in his preface he avows that he did not limit himself to such oracles as were in general circulation. "I will not hesitate to set forth for you along with my interpretations, whatever I learned carefully from the Elders, and remembered carefully, guaranteeing their truth. . . . If anywhere a man came who had followed the Elders, I used to ask about the words of the Elders; what Andrew or Peter said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the disciples of the Lord; also what Aristion and the Elder John say, the disciples of the Lord. For not the things out of the books seemed to profit me as much as the things from a living and surviving voice." He probably meant that he could cross-examine his informant and make perfectly sure of the incident and its bearings, whereas a book was a mere blank wall. At least he is quite emphatic as to his preference, and he took pains about securing information; there was only one link between him and several named disciples of the Lord. What could happen with more links may be seen by the twenty references to Papias gathered by Lightfoot: one retailer makes Papias the bishop of Hierapolis, this was copied by another; the same man makes him disciple of John, and this was copied by four others; the two statements are combined again by yet

another compiler: such instances of embellishment warn us of the need to test every link. Unfortunately Papias never names his direct informant, and we can never test that link; we can only rely on his cross-examination, and then depend on the disciples who were his ultimate authorities.

His information as it has come to us by fragmentary quotations, is of two kinds; anecdotes as to the disciples, sayings of the Lord. We may take these one by one, and test their inherent credibility.

First, we may take a famous passage which seems to contain both what the Elder said and what Papias commented:—The Elder said this also: "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately everything that he remembered, without however recording in order what was either said or done by Christ." For neither did he hear the Lord nor did he follow him; but afterwards, as I said, followed Peter, who suited his teachings to their needs, but not as though making a synopsis of the Lord's words. So then Mark made no error, thus writing some things as he remembered them; for he made it his one care to omit nothing he heard or to falsify what was therein.

Now what the Elder said is quite credible; that Mark wrote only after he followed Peter (to Caesarea?), that he wrote down correctly what he himself remembered, that everything else he put down was not arranged in order. If this be taken by itself, it calls attention to what is frequently overlooked, that Mark himself was an eye-witness, a first-class authority for everything that happened at Jerusalem. The Elder discriminated between that, and the miscellaneous anecdotes prefixed, which were only second-hand.

The comment of Papias is not very illuminating. He starts by what contradicts the Elder and is not probable: Mark probably did hear the Lord in the temple, probably did follow Him to Gethsemane. That Peter suited his teachings to the occasion is obvious on comparing his speeches at Pentecost, before the Council, to the disciples, at Samaria, at Caesarea, defending himself to the church at Jerusalem, backing Paul at Jerusalem; he never professed to edit the words of the Lord: in this case Papias does show some insight. But when he goes on to say that Mark made no mistake, took pains, put down everything he heard,—then Papias mistook his sense of what was fitting, for an ascertained fact. In other words, he embellished his information. It deserves notice that it became customary, on the basis of this comment of Papias, to emphasize precisely what Papias thought little of: he noted that the anecdotes about Galilee were not arranged; but others credited them because they depended on Peter.

A second statement is made by him, So then Matthew composed the oracles in the Hebrew tongue, and every one interpreted them as he could. Eusebius does not say that this was the tradition as Papias received it; it reads like his paraphrase of what he had heard. And it almost certainly has been distorted in the re-statement; for no one can believe that the existing gospel credited to Matthew is a translation from the Aramaic, and few people believe that as it stands it was the work of Matthew.

Other anecdotes told to Papias have been re-stated by later writers; that John the Divine and James his brother were killed by the Jews; that Barsabas Justus when challenged by unbelievers drank serpents' poison in the name of the Lord, and suffered no harm (told him by the daughters of Philip); that the mother of Manaen was raised from the dead; that others raised from the dead survived till the days of Hadrian. Only one anecdote survives as he wrote it down:—"Judas walked about in this world a terrible example of impiety; his flesh swollen to such an extent that, where a waggon can pass with ease, he was not able to pass, no, not even the mass of his head merely: they say that his eyelids swelled to such an extent that he could not see the light at all, while as for his eyes they were not visible even by a doctor looking through an instrument, so far had they sunk from the surface." It is credible that dropsy could thus embed the eyes, but barely credible that elephantiasis could swell a man beyond 18 feet round: the first gospel suggests that Judas hanged himself on the day of the crucifixion, Luke's note to Peter's speech would however tally with the anecdote of Papias. The other anecdotes present no difficulty, and may well be true.

There are two anecdotes about the Lord. The story about a woman accused of many sins before the Lord, which Eusebius knew also in the Gospel according to the Hebrews, is well known as interpolated into the fourth gospel. The other came from John the disciple of the Lord, who reported at great length how the Lord used to teach about the times of the kingdom after the resurrection, that corn and wine would be produced profusely. Papias added, "These things are credible to them that believe. And when Judas the traitor did not believe, and asked, How shall such growths be accomplished by the Lord?, he [John] relates that the Lord said, They who shall come to these times, shall see." The language is rather highflown, but the story is credible.

Two other traditions have been paraphrased by readers of Papias. One is indeed quite vague, "certain strange parables of the Saviour and teachings of His." The other is a bit of higher

criticism; Some people thought the Elder John was the author of the second and third epistles, because only the first epistle was accepted generally; others wrongly attributed the Apocalypse to the Elder John. It is a great pity that the actual words of Papias were not quoted, for he was only one remove from the Elder John.

Three other allusions to Papias do not record traditions, but his comments—about angels and their fall, a period of 10,000 years after the resurrection, the kingdom of Christ in material form on the earth—or a new fact, that a man rose from the dead in his own days. Eusebius was not far wrong when he inferred from such statements that Papias was a man of very mean capacity. But that need not invalidate the accuracy of his information. He certainly had high ideals as to testing tradition, and he seems to add a few trifles to our knowledge.

The next early document is a letter describing the death of Polycarp. Its importance in this connection is in the colophon: —"This account Gaius copied from the papers of Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp; the same also lived with Irenaeus. And I, Socrates, wrote it down in Corinth from the copy of Gaius; grace be with all men. And I, Pionius, again wrote it down from the copy aforementioned, gathering it together when it was now well night worn out with age, &c." This at first sight shows the care taken in other respects as to handing on information. But the colophon in another manuscript has been both expanded and altered. And Lightfoot argues that Pionius was lying. We have no problem to solve, for the letter itself contains no traditions.

Irenaeus however has a few. Seven times he quotes an unnamed person, giving his expositions or remarks; once he refers to predecessors who argued against the Valentinians; none of these involve traditions. Thrice he refers to "the divine Elder and herald of the truth," "an Elder who had heard from those who had seen the apostles and their disciples." Most of his quotations are of this Elder's own expositions, both of the Jewish scriptures and of the apostle's teaching, or of the Elder's general exhortations; there is no new fact, no new saying of the Lord or an apostle. There are also three references to the ancient disciple (or disciples) of the apostles; again only as to their own teachings and reasonings. Elders who saw John the disciple of the Lord are mentioned, but it is doubtful if they are other than the informants of Papias; anyhow the one fresh fact is that they read 666 as the number of the Beast, not 616. And the value of their testimony may be judged from this extract:— "Our Lord was of advanced age [aetas senior, forty or fifty] when he was teaching, according to the Gospel. And all the Elders who in Asia conferred with John the disciple of the Lord,

witness that John had delivered these things to them; for he abode with them till the days of Trajan. And some of them saw not John alone, but other apostles also, and heard the same things from them, and testify to the same account." If Irenaeus means that the Elders had been told by John that Jesus was over forty when He died, we are sure there was a mistake somewhere. It is possible however that what John told them was a few facts mentioned a little earlier; that Jesus was thirty at baptism, that this was the age of a Master, and that then He did actually begin to teach. In that case the blunder is only that of Irenaeus himself, misinterpreting the Gospel to which he refers, John viii. 56.

There is very little more to be gleaned. "The learned Origen affirms in his exposition of Matthew that John was martyred, declaring that he had learned this from the successors of the apostles." Whether this is a paraphrase of the tradition to Papias is not clear. When commenting on Romans vi. he said, "The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism also to infants." If he really said so, we should like to know the chain of tradition, which reached him alone. But this comment calls attention to a wider tradition than that of isolated sayings and anecdotes, a tradition of customs and teaching. Tradition in this sense had been rather fully discussed by two very different men, Irenaeus the Greek missionary theologian, Tertullian the African lawyer. They agreed that the common sense, the collective agreement, of the churches founded by the apostles, was conclusive as against novelties broached by men outside these churches, even though they individually might claim information handed down to them by a chain of named men, ultimately from the apostles. Each argument deserves study.

Irenaeus wrote against heresies, in five books. It is unfortunate that the one sentence (IV. xxxiii. 8) in which he defines true knowledge, is very long and involved, and may be understood in different ways. But again and again he reiterates that there was a traditional rule, that this was both written and oral, that the written rule was in four gospels (no others being conceivably authoritative) the Acts of the apostles, and their letters (though he does not specify them). For the oral rule, he refers to a formula which was the basis of catechetical instruction (teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you) and which was given verbatim at baptism. This formula was in substance the same at all churches founded by apostles, and not only the compact formula, but the general body of doctrine and direction: "the preaching of the Church is consistent everywhere, and continues in an even course, and

receives testimony from the prophets [of the Old Testament], the apostles, and all the disciples [since], as I have proved, through the beginnings, the means and the end; nay, through the entire dispensation of God, and that well-grounded system which tends to man's salvation; namely, our faith, which, having been received from the Church, we do preserve, and which always, by the Spirit of God, renewing its youth, as if it were some precious deposit in an excellent vessel, causes the vessel itself containing it to renew its youth also." This line of thought suggests that an ever-inspired Church may be divinely guided in its evolution, and may properly develop its teaching, its methods, its organization; but development is active, tradition is passive.

As to the channels through which tradition passed, he refers to the churches founded by the apostles: he styles Jerusalem "the church from which every church had its origin, the metropolis of the citizens of the new covenant"; but as that church was now very out of touch with Gentile churches, and was displaced from its old home, he never cites its contemporary witness. It is more strange that he ignores Antioch; Alexandria did not claim to be of apostolic foundation. He refers to Ephesus and Smyrna, but illustrates his point from the nearer city of Rome, familiar to all. As to the precise spokesman of a church, his language is not quite uniform. "Tradition which originates from the apostles is preserved by means of the successions of Elders in the churches," and, "We are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted Bishops in the churches, and the succession of these men to our own times," agree in singling out unbroken series of officers: the difference of titles may be postponed. The theory of Irenaeus was generally adopted and Eusebius of Caesarea, an apostolic church, confronted with a Greek church at Ælia Capitolina, pointed out several times that though this met on the site of Jerusalem, it had no continuity with the original mother-church of Jerusalem. The guarantee of accurate transmission was a continuous body of responsible officers—such as Corinth wantonly flung away in the days of Clement, thus perhaps forfeiting any claim to apostolic succession.

Tertullian wrote a special treatise against innovators, which really developed the apostolic test "We have no such custom, neither the churches of God"; but as a lawyer he used legal terms. Here are some of his points:—"In the Lord's apostles we possess our authority, and even they did not of themselves choose to introduce anything, but faithfully delivered to the nations the discipline which they had received from Christ. . . . What was taught by Christ is with us. . . . This rule of faith [substantially the Apostles' Creed] was taught by Christ. . . .

From what, and through whom, and when, and to whom, has been handed down that rule, by which men become Christians? . . . [The apostles] founded churches in every city, from which all other churches, one after another, received the tradition of the faith and the seeds of doctrine, and are still borrowing them, that they may become churches. . . . It is incredible that [any private talks of the apostles] could have been such as to bring in some other rule of faith, differing from and contrary to that which they were proclaiming through the catholic churches. . . . When that [doctrine] which is deposited among many [churches] is found to be one and the same, it is not the result of error but of tradition. . . . [Our challenge to heretics is] Let them show the origins of their churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops running down in due succession from the beginning, so that yonder bishop shall be able to show for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the apostles or of apostolic men; that is the way in which the apostolic churches hand down their records." In plain words, he propounds two tests—Continuous succession from apostles, identity of teaching with the apostles. He discusses the scriptures, and refers to an Integrum Instrumentum, as if he held one literal bound volume; but he expressly declines to argue with heretics from it, saying that Christians alone possess it and are entitled to interpret it.

A very different view was taken by Clement of Alexandria. He was a lecturer, who like most philosophers asked no authorization from anybody. Precedent for a Christian being a philosopher was found in Justin; precedent for a Christian philosopher to give public lectures at Alexandria was found in Pantaenus. There is no trace in Clement's published lectures that he cared anything for any church officer. He did however care greatly for tradition, insisting that his lectures were based upon what he had received. Only he deliberately declared that the true knowledge " is that which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted unwritten by the apostles ": this secret tradition was cardinal with him, and he argues for it at length. He declares at some length in his preface that his " Miscellanies " are simply written memoranda of oral lectures he heard from a few men; some were in the East; one was an Ionic whom he met in Greece, coming from Upper Syria, born in Assyria; the chief was a Hebrew, born in Palestine, who had taught in Magna Greecia, but whom he tracked to Egypt. " They preserving the tradition of the blessed doctrine derived directly from the holy apostles, Peter, James, John, and Paul, the sons receiving it from the father (but few were like the fathers), came by God's will to us also to deposit those ancestral and apostolic seeds." Some of them were alive when he wrote, and he

expected that they would be delighted, not with this personal tribute, "but solely on account of the preservation of the truth, according as they delivered it." The lectures are very miscellaneous, and scarcely give any new facts. But Eusebius quoted from another course, which is lost, several anecdotes as well as a few critical judgments of his own. The only things expressly given as traditions run:—Now as the blessed Elder [Pantaenus?] used to say, "Since the Lord, who was the Apostle of the Almighty, was sent to the Hebrews, Paul, as having been sent to the Gentiles, did not subscribe himself apostle of the Hebrews, both out of modesty and reverence for the Lord, and because being herald and apostle of the Gentiles, his writing to the Hebrews was something over and above [his exact duty]." On this we may note that Pantaenus does not give this as a tradition to him, but as his own opinion. Clement also gives the tradition respecting the order of the Gospels, as derived from the oldest Elders; but again Eusebius does not carry up the chain, and again the tradition is quite incredible, for it contains the statement that those gospels which contain the genealogies were written first. Fortunately we can read in Clement's own words a beautiful tale, "no mere myth but true, handed down and committed to the custody of memory, about the apostle John." It says that John was invited widely, here to appoint bishops, there to set in order whole churches. One such bishop failed in his trust, and the church sent again for John, who called the bishop to account and put matters straight.

It would take us too far afield to describe how there was an ecclesiastical revolution at Alexandria, how Demetrius the one ruler chosen by his fellow Elders to preside, assumed power over them, challenged Origen, who carried on the work of Clement, because he was a layman, quarrelled with him when he got ordained to try and please the autocrat, and when Origen settled down in Palestine, himself appointed a Head of the Catechetical School. It is only necessary to say that when Eusebius reports how Clement dedicated a book to "the above-mentioned bishop Alexander," his own list shows that this Alexander became bishop long after Clement had died, and that Alexander then did his best in a letter to Origen to atone for his predecessor's behaviour.

That revolution quite established bureaucracy at Alexandria, and henceforth we hear no more of any traditions transmitted through any other than official channels, no more of any traditions outside the written scriptures, the official property of the churches. But the idea of a private tradition, emphasized by Clement though scorned by Tertullian, brought about a transformation of the whole contents of the word Tradition, on which

we do not enter. We revert to the actual persons who transmitted the early tradition.

In two successive paragraphs, Irenaeus calls them Elders, Bishops. The latter term has become so usual that the other has been rather overlooked; but well-attested exceptions generally repay attention. Thirteen times does Irenaeus refer to an Elder or Elders who were links in his chain. In the two quotations from Papias preserved by Eusebius he too speaks of the Elders, the disciples of the Lord. In the two quotations from Clement similarly preserved, he speaks of his immediate informant, the blessed Elder, and again of the oldest Elders. And even Eusebius, when speaking about the testimony of Irenaeus, borrows once his terminology; "we refer to the declarations of the ancient Elders and historians of the Church, in which they have transmitted the traditions, &c." Two letters of Irenaeus show the same. To Florinus he spoke of "the Elders before us, who were even the immediate disciples of the apostles," and of Polycarp "that blessed and apostolic Elder." In his letter to Victor of Rome, he speaks three times of "those Elders who governed the church before Soter, &c."

It is evident then that in Asia at least, and perhaps at Rome also, the president of the church was called "The Elder" down to the times of Irenaeus. The usage dated from apostolic days, 1 Peter v. 1, 2 John 1, 3 John 1. The story about the Elder John shows that his influence was not that of a mere bishop, limited to a single congregation, but extended over a wide area, so that he was asked to appoint bishops. There is not quite enough evidence for us to infer that all "Elders" in this sense were thus superintendents over many churches.