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ARTICLE V.

WHY THE RAISING OF LAZARUS IS NOT
REPORTED BY THE SYNOPTISTS.BY ALEXANDER WESTON MOORE, D.D.,
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THE incident mentioned in the title is so important, in view of the prominence given to it in the Fourth Gospel and the striking utterances of Jesus inseparably associated with it, that the question of its authenticity cannot be regarded as answerable in the negative, or even as debatable, without seriously impairing the religious confidence of innumerable Christians. It is considered by many as a purely fictitious episode, because it seems inconceivable to them that a miracle of so startling a nature, if actually performed, should be related only in a single Gospel—and that the latest. The absence of any allusion to it by the Synoptists is conclusive evidence, so they argue, that three of the four Evangelists had never heard of it; and if they had never heard of it, then it never could have occurred.

Commentators have felt the full force of the difficulty, and have spared no effort and no ingenuity in seeking to explain the strange omission. Some have tried to satisfy themselves with the supposition that it was due solely to a regard for the safety of Lazarus, which might have been imperiled had attention been directed anew to the event. The hostility which had sought to encompass his murder at the time when the miracle was wrought might

have been revived with fatal results if it had been obtruded again on the notice of his enemies. But surely a lapse of twenty years or more between the event and the publication of the earliest Gospel — not to mention two of later date — would suffice to remove any such danger if it had ever been serious.

In trying to penetrate the mystery of the silence of the Synoptists it may be well to remind ourselves, at the outset, that the Gospels do not pretend to enumerate all the miracles of Jesus. In all four there are allusions to a great number of remarkable cures or signs which are not reported in detail. Typical cases seem to have been selected to represent the various kinds of diseases which he healed, or because of some special features of interest connected with them, while all the rest are despatched with some such general statement as "he healed many that were sick with divers diseases, and cast out many devils." No doubt there were interesting cures among those thus summarized; but there were various reasons why brevity should be cultivated in the original reports, and why "the many other things which Jesus did" should be only hurriedly glanced at.

It may be frankly conceded that if the raising of Lazarus were the only work of the kind recorded in the sacred narratives it would be incredible. If no such miracles were attributed to Jesus in the first three Gospels we should be justified in believing that it was a later accretion, that it simply illustrated a tendency of the primordial account to gather up marvels as time wore on. But such is not the fact. The Synoptists all ascribe to Jesus the power to raise the dead. The case of Jairus' daughter is reported by all three. And even if it should be contended that the maiden had not really expired, it is sufficiently obvious that such was not the opinion

of the Evangelists, which is all that it is necessary to show. Luke relates, also, the raising of the widow's son at Nain, concerning which there is no similar doubt.

Moreover, among the directions given to the disciples for their first apostolic tour Matthew includes a command to raise the dead. Both he and Luke mention, among the things which the disciples of John the Baptist were bidden by the Saviour to report to their master, the fact that "the dead are raised." That no such cases are to be found among the works which Jesus wrought at that particular time is of no significance; for the messengers were told to report the things which they heard as well as saw. All that is of present importance is that the power to raise the dead was thus recognized by the two writers as having been claimed by him. It is sufficiently evident, therefore, that the raising of Lazarus is not omitted in the earlier accounts because the power implied in it was not yet ascribed to Jesus.

It might be plausibly suggested that it was left out solely for the sake of brevity. As the healing of the deaf and dumb man described in Mark vii., and of the blind man in Mark viii., are passed over by Matthew and Luke, although it seems now to be generally admitted that one or both of these authors were acquainted with the Second Gospel; so, it might be said, three of the Evangelists, having already described miracles of the same class with the one in question, may have purposely omitted it to avoid an undue extension of their narratives.

But it will be answered that, although this explanation might be satisfactory if the incident thus passed over contained no features of special interest, it is clearly inadmissible in view of the peculiar and exceedingly impressive circumstances connected with it. The dead man was a member

of a family with which the disciples were intimate, and his resurrection took place four days after his decease. These facts alone, it might be said — not to dwell on Christ's clairvoyant knowledge of his death — must have stamped the miracle so deeply on the minds of the Evangelists that it would be almost the last incident they would have thought of leaving out of their records. If they were so anxious to keep the length of their narratives within bounds, it might be said, there was other material which they would have been more likely to sacrifice than a story so unique and inspiring. One would suppose that Matthew and Mark could better have spared the second feeding of the multitudes, that Luke would rather have left out the hymns in his first chapter.

Full weight should be given to the fact that the resurrection of Jesus himself was so stupendous an event that all his other works were relegated perforce to a subordinate class. The flame of a candle looks dull and wan when an electric light is turned on near it, and the glory of the risen Christ was so resplendent that it might well have rendered the minds of the early disciples insensitive to the distinctions of greater and less among minor miracles. They would scarcely think of one as being somewhat more remarkable than another when an infinitely more marvelous event than either had dazzled their perception of such differences. But it will be urged, in reply, that such a mental state would not last. Familiarity with the fact that Christ had risen would soon render it one of the ordinary details of the current belief — just as, in our own time, it has no tendency to blur the distinctions between greater and less in the other miracles.

Doubtless, too, no small part of the impressiveness attaching to it is traceable to the wonderfully graphic manner in which it is related. No one can read the account without be-

coming convinced that it is either a veracious narrative written by an eyewitness or a masterpiece of realistic fiction composed by a literary genius. Forty-four verses or more are given to it, while Luke condenses his account of the raising of Jairus' daughter into ten, and that of the miracle at Nain into six. If John's narrative had been written in the style of the Synoptists it might read somewhat as follows:—

Now while Jesus was beyond Jordan, at the place where John was first baptizing, the sisters of Lazarus sent unto him, saying, Our brother Lazarus is sick. But Jesus abode still in the place. And after two days he journeyed to Bethany, and it was told him that Lazarus was dead; and Martha and Mary brought him to the place where they had laid him. And Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Lazarus, come forth; and he that was dead came forth bound hand and foot with graveclothes. And Jesus said unto them, Loose him, and let him go. Now Lazarus had been in the tomb four days.

It is sufficiently evident that the story compressed within such narrow limits and shorn of so many of the striking and touching details which embellish John's account, would lose much of its impressiveness. In such a form it would not be much more likely to arrest attention than the incidents of the same class which are found in the other three Gospels. It would not seem so very much more wonderful than Luke's narrative of the somewhat similar event at Nain.

Yet perfect candor will probably constrain us to admit that even if it had come to the authors of the first written Gospels in such an abbreviated form, there are yet features in it which would have compelled them to regard it as the most remarkable event of its class; and such being the case, an ex-

planation of its omission by the Synoptists must still be sought. It is to be found, as the writer is convinced, in the history of the synoptical narratives, in the circumstances in which they had their origin.

The belief has been widely held in the Christian church, and still finds able and learned advocates, that the first three Gospels represent the oral traditions of the earliest Christianity. It is plausibly supposed that the preaching of the first apostles was largely made up of succinct narratives of the words and works of Jesus. These narratives, repeated again and again to different audiences and drilled into the minds of catechumens, would tend to take on fixed forms of expression, just as the prayers in prayer meetings are almost sure to become stereotyped in phraseology, and just as the speeches of a political candidate on a particular subject will gradually clothe themselves in the same general language. There would result changes in words, circumstances would be left out in one sermon, additional details given in another, so that there would be minor variations in the accounts received by the different churches; but there would be a general similarity in diction in the discourses of the same preacher, which would, in turn, find its way into the first written narratives. These would almost necessarily reproduce the very words in which the oral account had imbedded itself in the memory of the writers.

It is in this way that the puzzling discrepancies in the first three Gospels are believed by many to be satisfactorily accounted for. The language in places is almost identical in them all; then a different word is used in one or two of them. Here a fact appears which is not found elsewhere; while there a circumstance is left out which the other histories have preserved. It is believed by those who hold this theory that

all such variations in material and forms of expression are adequately explained by it. The original accounts would naturally be written down very early by individuals in the different Christian communities. Luke declares that anterior to the date of his Gospel there had been many cases of the kind. And it was to be expected, therefore, that some of these scribes would relate incidents and sayings which others had not heard of or had not seen fit to note down. Under such circumstances, the more thorough the canvass of the churches and their records and traditions made by a compiler, the more complete would be the resulting Gospel. How thorough the canvass really was, may be judged from the fact that even the earliest patristic literature adds nothing to the New Testament collection of the sayings of Jesus, with the exception of a few of extremely doubtful genuineness.

And even if this theory of the origin of the Gospels should be modified, to some extent, by the present tendency to substitute for it one which attributes a larger influence to the use of earlier written accounts by the Evangelists, the argument will not be seriously affected. For it will still be true that, unless we are to maintain that the words and works of Jesus were taken down or described by reporters or amanuenses on the spot, there must have been a time when there was no other source of information regarding them than the oral testimony of the earliest disciples and of those who had heard the story from their lips; so that the three Gospels must still rest on the foundation of the earliest preaching and teaching. And, more than that, even the earliest written accounts would have been shaped more or less by the causes about to be set forth.

Now it seems very evident that it was in Galilee, rather than in the southern province, that the gospel was chiefly

preached after the Crucifixion. The Evangelists would be considerably less exposed there to the persecutions of the ecclesiastical authorities. The church, as a whole, was driven out of Jerusalem — at least, for a time — at an early date,¹ and the gospel was preached there under great disadvantages. But it was more than a day's journey to Galilee, and there the new faith could be taught with much less difficulty and danger.

Then, too, it was an exceedingly populous country. Josephus claims that it contained two hundred and forty cities and large towns with a population of not less than fifteen thousand each. Allowing for the author's undoubted tendency to exaggeration, it was undeniably a very thickly settled region. It was provincial only in the sense that it was removed from the center and the influence of the highest Jewish culture and religious development. It was the most promising field for missionary enterprise in Palestine. And especially should it be remembered that it was the homeland of the apostles themselves, the scene of their principal labors during the lifetime of their Master. Scattered throughout its length and breadth were hundreds, if not thousands, who had heard the words of Life as they fell from the Saviour's own lips, or from those of the disciples while Jesus was still living. There is no record in the Book of Acts of the missionary work done there after his death, though the church is mentioned as existing there.² It cannot be doubted, however, that under such circumstances the story of the Cross would be there most fully told and known, and that the churches there founded would become, as a whole, the chief repository of the apostolic deliverances.

¹ Acts viii. 1.

² Acts ix. 31.

Now it is sufficiently evident that the first three Gospels were Galilean traditions. If we had no other information than what they contain, we should not be certain that Jesus had ever visited Jerusalem between the age of twelve and the last few days of his life.¹ About all his sayings that are reported in the synoptic writings and almost every miracle there related were uttered or wrought in Galilee. To a very large extent, of course, this was to have been expected, for the reason that the greater part of his work was actually done there; and what was there done, therefore, would be likely to occupy more space in the record than the remaining portions of his history. But the almost entire exclusion from these accounts of anything said or done in Jerusalem and Judea needs to be explained.

It will not be doubted that the gospel preached in Galilee was sure to take on, sooner or later, somewhat of a local color. Such a result would inevitably be brought about by the very laws of mental action. In relating the miracles of Jesus preference would always be given to those which had been wrought in the immediate vicinity, because they would be the most interesting and the most telling. How much more effective would be the narration of an incident of that character which had happened in the very town where the preacher was holding forth, or in its immediate neighborhood, where witnesses might be still living who would corroborate the story, than an account of even a somewhat greater work which had been done among strangers dwelling too far away to be consulted promptly or easily! How much more impressive would be the exhortation of a preacher who was rehearsing the marvelous works of Jesus, if he could say, "These things were not done in a corner, but here, close

¹But see Matt. xxiii. 37; Luke xiii. 34.

to the shore of your lake, in the presence of many witnesses, occurred the wonderful draft of fishes; over yonder, in your city of Capernaum, are still living many who can tell you, out of their own personal reminiscences, of the healing of the centurion's servant by a word spoken at a distance; it is only a few miles to the city of Nain, where the widow's son may be seen who was raised from the dead by the power of Jesus Christ"; — how much more convincing his words would be if he could thus name places and refer to witnesses close at hand, than if he should tell of what had been done in Bethany and Jerusalem, — places too far away to be visited at once and without trouble by those who might wish to verify the stories!

In other words, it was the principle of natural selection that was to determine what incidents should be retained in the Galilean Gospels. The survival of the fittest was operating even on the plane of evangelistic homiletics and literature. The necessity of limiting his remarks in order not to trespass too far on the patience of his hearers or readers, and for other obvious reasons, would be constantly compelling the preacher or teacher to leave out something; and that something would almost always be what had happened at a distance.

All the signs wrought in Jerusalem would be likely to be eliminated from the Galilean record by the same cause — as they were by some cause. It is not much more strange that the raising of Lazarus is not recorded in the first Gospels than that the cure of the blind man at the pool of Siloam has shared the same fate. It was in some respects more remarkable than any similar cure wrought in Galilee; for the man had been blind from his birth, and there were other attendant circumstances of a very striking nature. But it is left out of

the other accounts, as we may suppose, for the same reason that has already been adduced. Even a very wonderful cure which took place in a somewhat remote locality would produce less effect on the minds of an audience than another of the same kind which had happened close by, even though the latter should be lacking in some of the more striking features which characterized the other. The healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda is still another case in point. The Galilean congregations would be more moved by something which had happened nearer home; and palsied men had been healed in their own neighborhood, whose cases attested sufficiently the power of Jesus over ailments of that kind.

The original disciples, of course, would not be so much influenced by this selective tendency. They had been eyewitnesses of the wonders done in Jerusalem and the Judean province. They had been thrilled by the inspiring words spoken in connection with them. The startling scenes had fixed themselves in their memory; and even in Galilee, as we may well believe, they could not but have spoken of the things which they had seen in the Holy City and its neighborhood. It is safe to assume that the first Galilean congregations heard from them the whole amazing story, and were made acquainted with the salient features of Christ's ministry in the southern as well as in the northern province. But their successors, the preaching converts who had not been eyewitnesses of the events they related but simply passed along the narratives of those who had accompanied Jesus on his missionary tours, would feel a good deal less interest in reminiscences which could not but be less vivid to them than they had been to the Twelve, and they would begin to drop them out under the influence of the motives already described. It might have been expected that the First Gospel, commonly supposed to

have been written by one of those who were present when Jesus performed the miracle at Bethany, would retain some reference to the event. But it is not yet determined in what sense Matthew was the author of it. It seems to have been derived in the main, — at least, in its general outlines, — from the same body of traditions which was used by Mark and Luke. It certainly does not impress one as being a wholly independent account of the matters treated in it, or as being the story of an eyewitness, like the Fourth Gospel.

Now there is some evidence, though not of an obtrusive character, that the raising of Lazarus did have a place in the original Galilean account. If we examine closely the synoptic narratives of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem near the close of Christ's life, we shall be apt to feel the need of a key to the proper understanding of them. An historical motive for the great popular demonstration which then occurred seems to be lacking. Both Matthew and Mark divide the shouting multitude into those who followed and those who went before, as if there were some distinction between them which rendered it pertinent to call attention to the fact that both took part in the acclamations. John's narrative makes it clear what the distinction was; for in his wholly independent version of the incident he says that "a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried out, Hosanna: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel." It would appear from this that those who "went before" Jesus were these people, who had met him and turned back to escort him into the city, and that there was significance to the author of the account followed by the First and Second Gospels in the fact that people who had already

reached Jerusalem from various quarters were no less enthusiastic in their welcome to him than those who had come with him.

But there is no adequate cause assigned in the Synoptic Gospels for this universal demonstration. Taken by themselves they would give the impression that, after laboring for months in Galilee, Jesus visited Jerusalem — perhaps for the first time in his public career — and was accorded a reception such as had never been given him before even in the regions where his mighty works had been done. And although, with the assistance of the Fourth Gospel, we are enabled to correct the erroneous inference that he had not shown himself in the city previously, we are confronted, at the same time, with the fact that no special excitement had been occasioned by his earlier visits, although the last, if not all, of them had been preceded by the fame of his miracles wrought there or elsewhere. What, then, was the cause of this sudden popularity, of such a spontaneous political uprising in his behalf?

The Fourth Gospel answers the question. In the most natural way, and with no appearance of any harmonistic intent, John connects it with the raising of Lazarus. He states that the miracle was wrought in the presence of a multitude, that the Jews came to the house to see Lazarus afterwards, and that the crowd “went and met him [Jesus], *for that they had heard that he had done this sign.*” Assuming that such an amazing event had taken place and had been so incontrovertibly established, it would fully explain the popular excitement which followed the arrival of Jesus; while the lack of a credible motive for the outburst in the other narratives of the occurrence must inevitably suggest that something has there been left out of the account.

An illustration, perhaps, will not be out of place. Let us suppose that two thousand years hence the records of our civil war shall have been lost, and that the story of it has become confused to some extent. The movements which preceded it in the political world are consistently described — the secession of the States, the seizures of government property, the organization of the Southern Confederacy. The supineness of the administration, the apathy of the people, are also depicted in the fragmentary histories which have been preserved. The accession of a new chief executive makes no perceptible change in the situation. The Northern people are not thinking of war, but are divided among themselves and blaming one another for the disaster which has taken place. A letter from Washington to the *London Times* is found, written as late as the month of April, which declares that the government will make no attempt to restore the Union. But suddenly, before the middle of that same April, without assignable cause, the people spring to arms almost as one man. They forget party animosities. For years they pour into the field by millions, lavish their dollars by billions. They become as energetic and determined as they were before torpid and unwarlike. The critics would say that such an account is historically incredible, that it is not in accordance with the laws of human nature. Masses of men are not subject to such spasmodic and inexplicable mental revolutions. Either the first part of the story is wrong, — they would say, — or the second part is very largely a work of the imagination, or else some vital fact has fallen out of the narrative which would reconcile the conflicting accounts. If, now, another document is unearthed in which the attack on Fort Sumter and the hauling down of the American flag are described, everything becomes at once as

clear as daylight. A missing cause has been supplied. The three portions of the narrative now fit together in a single harmonious whole, and the previous confusion is seen to have been due to the accidental omission of an essential detail which belonged in the account.

It is an incongruity like the one just described that mars the historic likelihood of the first two versions of the triumphal entry. There is a break in the continuity of the story. That the visit of a Galilean teacher to Jerusalem should, without apparent cause, throw the city into an uproarious popular commotion, that a mob who were eagerly looking for a military Messiah should all at once recognize the object of their political yearnings in an humble philanthropist conspicuously parading the symbols of peace, is not, if it is the whole story, in accordance with the normal workings of the human mind. But there is the alternative supposition that it is not the whole story. Some essential part of the narrative may have been left untold. And John's version of the affair furnishes the missing link. It supplies a fact which transforms two seemingly irreconcilable accounts into a single self-consistent narrative. As the revelation, in this same Gospel, of an earlier meeting between Jesus and some of his disciples than the one first mentioned by the other Evangelists explains the otherwise well-nigh incredible promptness with which, according to the first two Synoptists, they left their work and followed him; so the story of the raising of Lazarus and its effect on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, as given by John, provides a key to the seeming inconsistencies of the other Evangelists, and by reconciling them proves itself to be an essential part of the narrative.

There is a legal instrument called an indenture, which de-

rives its name from the circumstance that in its original form it was cut in halves by a zizzag line. One of the pieces was given to each of the parties interested, and the genuineness of either could be proved if its indented margin fitted that of the other. An analogous method of proof is often used to establish the truth of the Gospel narratives. It consists in the collation of what are called "undesigned coincidences." When two accounts of a particular event which have been written without suspicion of collusion are found to supplement each other — details missing in one incidentally furnished by the other, improbable statements in the first freed from all unlikelihood by casual observations in the second — the conclusion is well-nigh irresistible that both accounts are true; for it is only the truth that can keep two stories in agreement with each other under such circumstances.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark there is a discrepancy in the narrative of the triumphal entry. It is as if a notch had been cut in their common story by which something of importance has been removed. The result is a suggestion of improbability in what, nevertheless, has every appearance of an honest attempt to tell things as they were. But many years afterwards another Gospel is written, which relates, with great circumstantiality of detail, one of the most impressive stories ever penned by mortal man, but the story is rejected by some because of an alleged lack of corroborative evidence in the other narratives. It is like a projecting angle in the edge of an indenture. There are many who wish it were not there. It seems to them that the genuineness of the Gospel containing it could be better defended if it had been left out. But on comparing it with the account in the other Gospels it is found to fit perfectly the gap which there exists. Each explains the other. Some such story as that

of John is implied by a discrepancy in Matthew and Mark. The psychological inconsistency discoverable in them vanishes when the former is applied to it. Whatever may be thought of the credibility of the miracle itself, it is useless to impugn it as being a later addition to the original record: for the considerations already adduced furnish a satisfactory reason for believing that it was part and parcel of the primitive Christian tradition. And until it can be proved that the preaching of the first disciples and their converts exerted no important influence in giving initial shape to our present Synoptical Gospels — until it can be proved, indeed, that the authors of the first written Galilean histories of Christ's work would not have been likely to cultivate brevity in their accounts by leaving out of them what had happened farthest away — the law of the survival of the fittest must always suggest a rational and plausible explanation of the omission of the story of the risen Lazarus from the first three narratives of the Evangelists, and render extremely fragile and hazardous any theory of the origin of the Fourth Gospel founded on the assumption that it contains material of vital importance which the earliest sacred historians had never heard of.