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The Racial Outlook of the Four Gospels.

By the Rev. J. T. LEVENS, M.A.

THE most difficult and at the same time the most attractive problems which face a student of the New Testament are those concerned with the composition of the Four Gospels. To assist in their solution there is now accumulated a whole library of critical writings, compiled by some of the ablest scholars of the Old World and the New. The critics exhibit a surprising variety of opinion, but amidst much difference there is practical agreement on certain points. All are agreed, for example, that the order in which the Evangelists wrote is not that in which they are found in the New Testament, and that St. Mark was written first, followed by St. Matthew, then by St. Luke, and then by St. John. It is also universally believed that there existed contemporaneously with St. Mark's Gospel, and probably prior to it, a book of Logia, or Sayings of Jesus (including also some of His actions), which for convenience is known by the symbol Q, and which is embedded in the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke. There is also a growing inclination to postulate St. Matthew as the author of Q, and to ascribe the Gospel which bears his name to an unknown writer. The Lucan authorship of the Third Gospel is established, but in regard to the Fourth there is serious difference of opinion, although English-speaking scholars are almost unanimous in ascribing it either to St. John the Apostle, or to John the Presbyter of Asia. The criticism which has reached these results is mainly of the higher or non-textual order, and its chief tools are comparison and analysis.

A field in which experts have been diligently labouring for years is not likely to yield any vacant ground for a tyro like the writer of this article, but as it appears to him that there is one corner which has been overlooked, he ventures to draw the reader's attention to it, and to describe it as "The Racial Outlook of the Four Gospels."

Each of the writers of the Gospels was a Jew, and his whole

outlook was coloured by his nationality. This characteristic is more marked in St. Matthew than in any of the other three Evangelists, but it is unmistakably present in them also. To this, however, sufficient value has already been attached by critics. What they have not valued is the fact that each Gospel was written with a particular intention. The Gospels and Epistles were alike in this, that though fit for universal circulation, they were in their first issue addressed to a definite destination. Each Evangelist had a particular "public" in view, and wrote in the first instance for its information. It was with this end that he set about his task, selected his materials, and arranged them. If it can be shown, as I believe it can, that each Gospel was written for one of the four great races of the Roman Empire in the first century, some fresh light will be thrown on the New Testament.

If we can transport ourselves in thought to the first century, and ask what motives would be likely to act on the Evangelist St. Mark, and urge him to write the life of Jesus, we shall find that these motives were partly Christian and partly Roman. He wished to write a Gospel for Christians who were subjects of the Roman Empire. Jesus Himself had been a Roman subject, and had been put to death by Roman soldiers with the sanction of a Roman Governor. It was needful, therefore, to tell the story of His life so as to show that He had been a loyal subject, who taught no sedition, and whose claims were not hostile to the Roman Empire. If, as appears almost certain, St. Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome,[1] we may surely conclude that he would be profoundly influenced by his surroundings, and desirous of commending the Gospel to all Romans who were willing to give it an unbiassed hearing. When we remember that the first apologies for the Christian faith were addressed by Justin Martyr to the Emperors Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, it lends some probability to the supposition that the

[1] Harnack, in "The Date of the Acts and of the Synoptic Gospels" (III., c. 7), argues that St. Mark may have written the Gospel before he came to Rome, and revised and issued it there. He rejects Wellhausen's conjecture that Jerusalem was the place of composition.

earliest Gospel was written for the instruction of Roman Christians and their sympathizers. It is also probable that the late tradition that St. Mark wrote originally in Latin arose not merely from the older tradition that he wrote at Rome, but from the known fact that he wrote for Roman Christians.[1] The Latinisms found in St. Mark lend no probability to the tradition that he wrote in Latin, but they do add another proof for our theory.

In Roman literature there existed a well-marked distinction between commentaries and histories. The former were jottings made at the time the events dealt with occurred, or written shortly afterwards, and their authors were eyewitnesses or those who gathered their material from eyewitnesses. These commentaries were direct, vivid, simple, and brief. They were popular productions, and though not attaining to the level of history, they formed the material out of which history might be composed. The most famous examples are the Commentaries of Julius Cæsar, which were widely circulated in Rome a few years before the composition of St. Mark's Gospel. Cicero, who was no friend of Cæsar, yet praised the style of his Commentaries, noting specially their "brevity, accompanied with simplicity and clearness."[2] It is no extravagant supposition that St. Mark may have been acquainted with Cæsar's Commentaries, either in their original tongue or in a Greek translation. Certainly his Gospel belongs to the same class of narrative, and possesses the same directness of diction, the same wealth of movement and incident, the same simplicity of language, the same absence of comment and reflection. The people who relished the style of the Commentaries of Cæsar were not likely to be indifferent to the style of the Gospel of St. Mark.

There is nothing in the Gospel to which a Roman citizen could take exception as savouring of rebellion or disorder. The

[1] Some modern critics hazard the conjecture that St. Mark wrote in Aramaic. The guess is a very wide one, as they have to admit that St. Matthew and St. Luke knew St. Mark in a Greek translation only. *E.g.*, Archdeacon Allen in "Studies in the Synoptic Problem," p. 295.

[2] "Brutus," cap. 75.

non-political teaching of Jesus is clearly set forth, and His attitude to the Roman Government declared in the great sentence: "Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's." Professing to set forth the Gospel of the Son of God, it does so, not by demonstration but by narrative, and it is remarkable that at the climax of the story it is a Roman officer who utters the declaration that Jesus was verily the Son of God.[1] The character of the Gospel becomes altogether intelligible when we realize that it was written for Roman Christians, in order to tell them the facts about Jesus which they most desired to know. It is a fact, at least, that St. Mark's Gospel proved specially acceptable to the Latin races; and it continued to be their favourite Gospel, and the one they cherished as peculiarly their own, until St. Augustine lent the great weight of his authority to the erroneous opinion that St. Mark was but an abbreviation of St. Matthew.

It is a commonplace of New Testament criticism to describe St. Matthew's Gospel as the Gospel of the Jew. Its atmosphere is that Jewish-Christian one which we find also in the Epistle of St. James. The writer had clearly before his mind the needs of Christian Jews, or of Jews inquiring into the claims of Jesus to be the Christ, and he wrote the Gospel to meet their needs. He shows how Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham, fulfilled the ancient prophecies contained in the oracles of Israel. Like another and greater Moses, He gave from a mountain-top the laws of a new kingdom of God. The relationship of the new to the old economy is carefully defined as being one of fulfilment and not destruction, and the permanence of the old law is assumed. The stern anti-Pharisaism of the writer reveals the strength of his feeling against the bigots of his own nation who rejected the claims of Jesus. Everywhere the privileged position of the Jew is recognized as being the first to be called into the kingdom and as furnishing the nucleus of an inner and spiritual Israel. Other evidences might be given that St. Matthew's Gospel was the Gospel of the Jew; but it seems unnecessary to labour a point so manifest and so widely admitted.

[1] St. Mark xiv. 39.

The Evangelist's aim—to write for the Jew—had a deep influence upon the character and contents of his Gospel. It furnished a criterion by which he tested the material at his disposal, and accepted or rejected it as necessary or useless for his purpose. The limitations of the Evangelist, especially his apparent inability to conceive of the Gospel as an emancipation from the Law of Moses, were largely the result of his racial outlook as well as of his racial prejudices.

The Third Gospel is as much the Gospel of the Greek as St. Matthew's is the Gospel of the Jew. The writer is the only Evangelist who declares in a preface the reasons that moved him to write his Gospel, and although he does not directly say that he wrote specially for Greeks, it is self-evident that he had a larger public in view than the Greek to whom the Gospel is addressed. If Theophilus was acquainted with the Gospels of St. Mark and St. Matthew, he may not have found either of them entirely satisfactory. His cultured taste may have disapproved of the style of St. Mark, with its bareness of narrative and its absence of literary grace, even as his Greek prejudices may have recoiled from the Jewish character of St. Matthew's Gospel. He may have hinted to St. Luke that there was room for a third Gospel —one so written that an educated Greek might read it with pleasure. Be this as it may, St. Luke's Gospel is such a work. It is the literary Gospel of the New Testament, and it has evidences of careful and artistic workmanship, alike in the scheme of its composition, the arrangement of its contents, the order of its sentences, and the choice of its words. The broad humanism of St. Luke has frequently been noticed. He is singularly free from Jewish prepossessions, and it seems as though his Gospel was designed to show to the Greeks that Jesus was the Friend of humanity and the Redeemer of all mankind. This characteristic of St. Luke is perhaps most plainly seen in those passages which are peculiar to his Gospel. These are often *obiter dicta* or sayings or deeds arising from chance questions or what look like accidental encounters. St. Luke chronicled such things, in preference to set discourses or official utterances, as better revealing the nature and character of Jesus. They were

just the things to appeal to a Greek, who might be unimpressed by the signs of power which were detailed by St. Mark, or the fulfilment of prophecies pointed out by St. Matthew, but who could not fail to be impressed by the wisdom, compassion and grace which were conspicuous in Jesus as He appeared in the Gospel of St. Luke.

The Fourth Gospel stands in a class by itself, as even the most unlearned of readers cannot fail to see. The portrait of Jesus which it presents is from a new point of view, and the artist has a distinct method and aim of his own. He was acquainted with the works of the other three Evangelists, but he did not borrow from them nor was he influenced by them. He wrote towards the close of the first century, when the expectation of the immediate return of Christ was growing fainter, and the eschatological beliefs of the Church were undergoing a change. The appearance of certain heresies while these changes were in process made it necessary to review the whole Christian conception of the person and work of Jesus. It was a purpose of the Fourth Gospel to present this revised conception, and to show that Jesus was none other than the Word of God Incarnate. But just as each of the Synoptists had his particular "public," for whom in the first instance he wrote, so also St. John had—we may assume—a particular "public" in view. Already there existed a Gospel for the Roman, a Gospel for the Jew, and a Gospel for the Greek, but there was one great race to which none of these Gospels specially appealed. It was the Oriental race, inhabiting the eastern provinces of the Empire, and found side by side with the Greeks along the coast-line of Asia Minor and Syria. This race had its own religious ideas and beliefs, and amid much that was degrading and superstitious there existed a nobler creed which expressed the spiritual hopes and needs of elect souls. There was, for example, the recognition of light as the natural manifestation and true symbol of goodness, just as darkness was of evil; the belief that life was a Divine gift and had in it something Divine; the idea of the need for a new and spiritual birth by which a man might be initiated into a higher life and truer knowledge;

the practice of sacramental meals by which a worshipper was brought into union with his Deity; the belief in immortality through death. Some of these beliefs had travelled across the bridge of Asia Minor into Europe, and were apparent in the mysteries of the Greek religion. In Asia Minor itself there was one city where East and West met together, where the Greek philosopher was face to face with the Eastern Magian, and where the wonderful temple of Diana harboured a worship which was less that of the Grecian goddess than of the Oriental faith in the fruitful principle of life. It was Ephesus, the home of St. John and the birthplace of the Fourth Gospel. What more reasonable than to suppose that its author would be impressed by the needs of the Oriental race amongst whom he lived, that he would be conversant with their religious beliefs, and that he would be anxious to show them that the Lord Jesus in whom he believed was not merely the Messiah of the Jew or the Saviour of mankind, but also the Divine Word who was the complete revelation of God, in whom was life—and the life was the light of men—whose flesh was meat indeed and whose blood drink indeed, and who was the giver of life eternal and the conqueror of death? The great ideas of the mystery religions of the East are found in the Fourth Gospel, but are found transfigured, spiritualized, and Christianized.

All commentators on the Fourth Gospel seem willing to grant that its author was of the school of St. Paul, and strongly in sympathy with the great Apostle's presentation of the Gospel. That sympathy, however, was not likely to be confined to the substance of St. Paul's teaching; it would extend also to his manner of presenting the Gospel, and we know from St. Paul's own words what that manner was. To the Gentiles, he tells us, he became as a Gentile, that he might gain them for Christ. That is to say, he met them on their own ground, he accepted their religious ideas, in so far as these were in any degree right, and he showed them how Christ fulfilled and summed them all in Himself. A similar method was followed by St. John. He, who had pondered for years over his recollections of Jesus, and had been guided by the Holy Spirit into a profound under-

standing of the truths he had preserved, had also brooded over the chaos of ancient mystical beliefs which he found in the Eastern faiths around him, until he saw clearly that the Divine Word had come forth from God to bring order and light to these also.

In bringing forward the supposition that the Fourth Gospel was written specially for the Oriental race, and that the nature of its contents is best understood on this hypothesis, I am well aware that I advance what has the disadvantage of novelty and may at first seem too far-fetched to be reasonable. But the Gospel itself is so complex a problem, and there are so many threads in its intricate web, that it may chance there are some which have escaped notice or examination. It seems evident, also, that the disposition to credit Philonism with the inspiration of the Fourth Gospel is rapidly decreasing amongst critics. Dr. Julius Grill, in his recent work on the origin of this Gospel, has shown that its leading ideas are Life and Light; and Harnack has argued with reason that the Prologue to the Gospel is an afterthought or postscript, rather than a preface or programme which is elaborated in the contents. Elsewhere he has said that the Logos of St. John has "little more in common with that of Philo than the name, and its mention at the beginning of the book is itself a mystery, and not the solution of one."[1]

The fact that no commentator on the Fourth Gospel hints at the solution I have proposed does not affect one who believes that this Gospel has not yet come into its own. The last of the Four Gospels to be written, it remains the last to be interpreted. Western criticism, analysis, and comment it has had in abundance, but much of it still remains to us an enigma. It awaits, perhaps, the interpretation of the great race for which it was first written. When the Crescent wanes in the East, and the Cross is planted on the ancient shrines of Hinduism, then it may be that the wisdom, patience, subtlety and mysticism of the Oriental mind will assimilate and interpret to the West the full meaning of the truths concerning Jesus which are contained in the Fourth Gospel.

[1] "History of Dogma," I., 97.