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The Earliest Witness to the Gospel Story.

BY THE REVEREND D. M. M'INTYRE, GLASGOW.

'THE Word became flesh, and dwelt among us': this is the living centre of the Christian belief. God has entered into history: the Eternal has revealed Himself in time. In this seeming paradox there is no contradiction, for the finite may receive the infinite, man may possess God.

The manifestation of Christ is an assured fact of history; every line of evidence demonstrates His existence. But the exact correspondence of the Evangelic portrait with the One portrayed is to some a matter of doubt. The antithesis is sometimes drawn between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Occasionally we are asked, quite bluntly, to choose—'Jesus or Christ.'

It is frequently alleged that, as a considerable range of time stretches between the events narrated in the Gospel records, there is room for modification, enlargement, idealization. Various answers might be opposed to such an assertion. We might point to the process of Christ through the centuries, as He journeys on His beneficent way, healing, comforting, ennobling—'the Holiest among the mighty, and the Mightiest among the holy.' We might also offer our personal witness to His grace and truth, saying with the Psalmist, 'Come and hear, all ye that fear God; and I will declare what he has done for my soul.' But now we shall restrict ourselves to this reply: No such interval as is imagined does intervene between the life of Jesus and its commemoration—no dark 'tunnel,' where faith stumbles and is afraid. The sequence is unbroken, the history runs without arrest; whereas it is true that, in their completed form, the Gospels belong to the second half of the first Christian century, the scenes and sayings which they record come to us straight from the days of Christ.

In the opening section of the Acts, terminating, let us say, at the eighteenth verse of the eleventh chapter, we have a reliable history of the earliest years of the Church's story. The most conspicuous event in this period is the conversion of Saul. We are not able to date this remarkable occurrence with any exactness. Harnack puts it within a year of the crucifixion; Sir W. M. Ramsay thinks that three years may have elapsed; Bishop Light-

foot suggests four years; Zahn adds one year more. Let us suppose, then, that the annals of the early Church contained in these eleven chapters are mainly concerned with a period of little more than five years.

The question before us is: What is the witness of those years, as conveyed in these chapters, to the facts contained in the Four Gospels?

We may rely on the accuracy of Luke as an historian. He claims, and with reason, to be 'accurate in all things, from the first.' Wendt acknowledges that the Acts of the Apostles is 'an historical work of invaluable worth.' Sir W. M. Ramsay says emphatically, 'Luke's history has been unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness.' 'You may press the works of Luke,' he goes on to say, 'beyond any other historian's and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment.' Dr. Knowling, in his three courses of the Boyle Lecture, tests each point of the narrative in turn, and finds that every affirmation rings true. This is, as a little reflexion will show, a very searching test, for in the thirty years embraced by the Acts the scene of the Apostle's labours shifts from one land to another; frequent political changes occur; ancient customs pass; titles, forms of procedure, modes of worship, change from page to page—and yet the narrator (we have confidence in saying) has not been detected in a single error. On the contrary, a considerable number of supposed blunders have been proved, after full examination, to be accurate statements of fact.¹

Some things we may test for ourselves.

At the time when Luke wrote, the organization of the Church had become much more complex than it was in the early days of which he is the historian; but nothing of this intrudes into the narrative.

The doctrinal pronouncements, too, had become more carefully articulated, but in these chapters we meet only a simple, heart-full devotion to the Redeemer, which is content, apart from argumentative statement, to fill heaven and earth with His name.

Nor can we say that the historian has idealized

¹ R. B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, xlv i.

the Church of the first days. The beauty of holiness that rested upon it is certainly displayed, but it is displayed in an honest narration which conceals no fault. We read of Ananias and Sapphira within the Christian Society, of Simon Magus a professed convert, of murmurings among the widows who received the Church's bounty, and of the narrow spirit of Judaism which drew apart from other believers and sharply censured the apostle of the circumcision himself.

One point is important. When Luke is writing without dependence on others, as in the preface to his Gospel or in the later travel-narratives in the Acts, he writes fluent Greek of the classical mode; in other places his language is coloured according to the authorities which he follows. In the chapters before us, for example, every page is sprinkled with Aramaisms. From this we conclude that he had before him an early Palestinian source, and that he adhered to it with such scrupulous fidelity as to reproduce its very idiom and lexical peculiarities.

Another consideration will appeal to every reader. The New Testament writers were serious men, profoundly impressed with the importance of the revelation that had been entrusted to them. It came to them as spirit and truth, and they affirmed it with utter truthfulness, believing also that they wrote under the guidance and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Now let us ask—What are the points of contact between these chapters and the four canonical Gospels?

I.

In the first place, we have an outline of the life of our Lord which corresponds in every particular with the Gospel narrative.

Jesus was of Nazareth, son of Mary, and one of several brothers. He was baptized by John in Jordan, receiving from the Father the unction of spirit and power. He chose twelve disciples (their names are given). Eleven were Galileans; these all remained faithful. Judas, the twelfth, betrayed Him. By this disciple the captors of Jesus were guided; for this act of treachery he received a reward, and afterwards perished miserably. Jesus went about doing good. He healed many who were sick. He was prophet and teacher. The Messianic predictions of the Old Testament were all fulfilled in Him; in particular the prophecy

of the Servant of Jehovah. He was condemned by Caiaphas and the rulers of Israel. He was tried by Herod, was sentenced by Pilate. The Roman judge wished to discharge him, but, yielding to clamour, handed Him over to the executioners. Barabbas, a murderer, was preferred to Him. He was crucified, was raised from the dead, showed Himself alive to His disciples, ate with them. In the Spirit He commanded His followers to bear His name to the ends of the earth, but charged them to tarry in Jerusalem till they should be clothed upon with power from on high. During forty days He instructed them in things pertaining to the Kingdom of God. His return having been foretold, He was received up into heaven.

II.

Let us, in the second place, examine a number of allusions contained in these chapters to certain events that are recorded in the Gospels. Some of these are easily recognizable, others are less evident. But the cumulative impression is that the early chapters of the Acts are in complete accord with the evangelic records.

The false witnesses suborned in the trial of Stephen alleged: 'We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place.' This is precisely the accusation levelled against the Master in the house of Caiaphas. Those false witnesses go on to say, 'And change the customs which Moses delivered unto us.' For this allegation they had better reason, as the disciples themselves had come to understand that when our Lord drew a distinction between ceremonial purification and the purifying of the spirit, He was 'making all meats clean' (Mk 7¹⁹). Peter, in his visit to the house of Cornelius, acted upon the principle then laid down by the Lord.

Both in the Acts and in the Gospels baptism and the gift of the Spirit are associated. In the house of Cornelius the apostle demanded, 'Can any man forbid water, that these who have received the Holy Ghost as well as we should not be baptized?' Afterwards, defending his course of action, Peter quotes one of the sayings of Christ: 'I remembered the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost.' These verses recall Mt 3¹¹ and Lk 24⁴⁹. They also suggest the inward significance of the ordinance of baptism as instituted by Christ and administered

by the disciples (Mt 28¹⁹; cf. Ac 2⁴¹ 8¹². 18. 39 9¹⁸ 10⁴⁸).

The accustomed meeting-place of the disciples, after the Lord's departure, was 'the upper room'; and a ritual act, common among them, and regarded as of primary importance, was 'the breaking of bread.' Thus we are reminded of the institution of the Lord's Supper.

Simon Peter, addressing the circle of Annas and Caiaphas, assured them there is none other name under heaven that is given among men wherein we must be saved. May he not have had in remembrance the words of Jesus: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me'? Again Peter says with reference to the condemnation of the Lord, 'I wot that in ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers.' Does not this suggest to our mind the first word from the Cross, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do'? Once more: 'This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which was made the head of the corner'—what is this but the echo of our Saviour's quotation from the Psalter, 'The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner'?

The historian tells us that a field was purchased with the blood-money paid to Judas. This is in full accordance with the account given in the first Gospel. There it is described as the potter's field, and is called *Aceldama*.

In Samaria Philip preaches *Christ*; to the Ethiopians he preaches *Jesus* (8⁵. 35). The Ethiopian probably knew little of Israel's hope, but the narrative in Acts reminds us of the interest taken in the advent of the Messiah, both by the woman of Sychar and by the men whom she summoned to meet Him (Jn 4²⁵. 29).

The account of the laying out of the sick in beds and couches in the streets of Jerusalem, in the expectation of the passing of Peter, leads one to suppose that he had often described to his Jerusalem audiences the events of the evening of that memorable day, Christ's first Sabbath in Capernaum, when it seemed as if all the city had been gathered together at the door of his lowly dwelling (Ac 5¹⁵, Mk 1³²; cf. Mk 6⁵⁶).

Stephen's manner of citation from the Old Testament recalls the walk to Emmaus, when, beginning from Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Precisely the same method

was observed by our Lord when, in the upper room, He reminded them that 'All things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me.' It is worth remarking that Paul's sermon in Antioch of Pisidia followed a similar line of selection.

In some of his miraculous works Peter evidently imitated the manner of Christ. In the raising of Dorcas, for instance, we are reminded of the bringing again to life of the daughter of Jairus: 'Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning to the body, he said, *Tabitha cumi*.'

The impression of the greatness of Jesus and the power of His passion left on the mind of Stephen is evidenced by his dying testimony: 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God . . . Lord Jesus, receive my spirit . . . Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.' He dies upon the very words of Christ.

One might add other instances illustrating the statements already made—that the believers, in those first years of the faith, frequently referred, not to the Gospels, for these as yet were non-existent, but to the story which the Evangelist later committed to writing; and that the two records, the Acts and the Gospels, are in fullest harmony with each other. But these examples may suffice.

III.

A third point to which we shall direct notice is, the identity of the view entertained of our Lord's Person and Mission with that which was announced by Christ Himself and reproduced in the Gospels.

The resurrection of the Redeemer, His return to the Father, His session at the right hand of God, and His coming again in glory, were predicted by Himself, and witnessed to by the Apostles. If the two lines of teaching were placed in parallel columns, the similarity would be very striking. It is evident that the Apostles affirm these truths on the authority of their Master.

It was by the ascended Saviour that the gift of the Spirit was dispensed, even as He had said, 'If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him unto you' (cf. 1⁴. 6 2³⁹). How great must He be who is empowered to commission the Holy Ghost!

The departing Saviour assured His people that, though He might seem to leave them, He would surely remain with them all the days, even to the end. And in the history we are informed that it was He who added to the number of His worshipping people such as were being saved; by His power the lame man at the Gate Beautiful was restored to strength. It was He who received the spirit of the departing Stephen, instructed Ananias regarding Saul of Tarsus, made Æneas whole. At every call of duty, in every hour of danger, the disciples felt the touch of 'the hand of the Lord upon them.' He enters so fully into the life of His people, that they and He are one—'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?'

The exalted majesty of the Lord Jesus filled the thoughts of the first preachers of the gospel. Paul begins his ministry with the unhesitating affirmation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. He is, replies Simon, the Author of life, the Lord of all, the Judge of quick and dead. His return in the power of the Father is to be the signal for the restitution of all things.¹ Collectively and individually His people offer to Him the tribute of praise and the homage of worship.

¹ 9²⁰ 3¹⁸ 10³⁶. 42 3²⁰, 21.

Thanksgiving, petition, adoration are addressed to Him. All these affirmations find their warrant in the Gospels.

This glorious One is the Saviour, and the only Saviour, of men. He is the sole Object of faith, the preacher's constant Theme. Remission of sins is in His name and by His gift. The largest, freest proclamations of salvation are made on His behalf: 'Unto you first, God, having raised up his Servant, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.'

Language could scarcely go further: the Johanne theology is latent in the history of the first days: the Gospels are certified in advance.

In a word, the conclusion that is pressed upon us by these considerations is, that, between the life of Jesus as it was lived and the record of it in the Gospels, there is no place for any 'idealization' of the Lord's earthly ministry; neither is there opportunity for the formation of 'myth' or 'legend.' All that the Evangelists have to say of the greatness of the Redeemer was said in the years immediately subsequent to His death. Indeed, we may safely assert that the main stream of Gospel testimony was flowing unhindered in the Church in the year in which Jesus died.

A Singular Reading of Codex B justified.

By J. RENDEL HARRIS, LITT.D., LL.D., MANCHESTER.

IN 1 Co 8⁶, where St. Paul is explaining the right attitude of Christian believers towards idols and idol-feasts, he makes the statement that 'although there are many so-called gods in heaven and on earth, gods many and lords many, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we are for Him—and one Lord, to wit, Jesus Christ, by whom (δι' οὐ) are all things, and we are by Him (δι' αὐτοῦ).' The reader of the Greek New Testament, who begins to study these rhythmically parallel sentences, will find on the margin of his text in Westcott and Hort's edition the suggestion of a various reading; instead of 'by whom,' it is suggested that we read 'for whom,' i.e. δι' ὧν instead of δι' οὐ. The change is microscopical as regards the letters of the text, and not very violent as regards the meaning. On looking into the reason for the suggested change,

we see that it is a case of the Codex Vaticanus (B) against all the rest of the Greek MSS., and, of course, if Hort's dictum that 'no readings of Codex B can safely be neglected' be correct, the variant ought to be transferred from the margin into the text. It is interesting to be able to show that, whatever the general value of the dictum may be, it is in the present case correctly applied. We are going to justify the marginal reading by some curious considerations, which have never been applied before to the determination of the value of a various reading. We must go somewhat far afield in our inquiry, but the labour will not be lost.

In a recent issue of the *Rylands Library Bulletin*² we discussed the reaction of Stoic formulæ upon the Book of *Wisdom* directly, and

² *Loc. cit.* January 1922.