

THE EARLIEST GOSPEL WRITINGS AS POLITICAL DOCUMENTS

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THE investigations of Abbott and Rushbrook (1884) under the title "The Common Traditions of the Gospels" gave a new view to what is now referred to as the "Triple Tradition." The Ammonian sections were separated by Ammonius of Alexandria in the third century, and are preserved for us in the "canons" of Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century out of which may be constructed the Triple Tradition, the Dual Tradition, and Single Tradition. Scholars of the last century placed these several traditions as antecedent to our gospels and used by each synoptic writer in the composition of his work. It is accepted today that Mark is the earliest gospel and that Matthew and Luke wrote independently of him.

Criticism has assumed that the fundamental traditions upon which our gospels rest were gathered together for the general information of early Christians in regard to the works and the words of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of the churches. The astonishment is that Jesus cured so many and that of all the cures only the merest few are recorded. And these lack detail such as would deeply interest the churches. The wonderment is that the Nazarene should cast out so many devils and only the Gadarene incident be given with anything like completeness. It would be unbelievable that the Galilean should command the tempest and walk on the sea and feed with a few loaves of bread and several fishes thousands of people, and that a few of his neighbors would be strong enough or even dare to kill him. It must be admitted that Jesus of Nazareth was a master teacher, a rabbi that commanded attention, especially in Galilee. His popularity must have been immense. But his work could have been nothing but what man had wrought before. His words were notable but not revolutionary to Rome, or to the Herod who was

ruler of Galilee when Jesus spoke and did philanthropic healings in his realm. John the baptist was public example of what reproof to civil rulers incurred in those days and the numerous crucifixions by procurators of patriotic Pharises, who longed for the restoration of the Jewish kingdom and for release from Roman domination, were cogent warnings to all Jews who would influence the public mind.

Scientific criticism concerns itself with facts. The synoptic gospels in its view are records of the deeds and words of Jesus of Nazareth, a physician and a religious teacher. The recitative portions of these gospels are strikingly alike, whereas the narratives have marked and outstanding differences. Matthew's gospel is about one-fourth narrative, Mark's gospel about one-half, and Luke's about one-third. There are not more than twenty-four verses in Mark to which parallels may not be found in Matthew and Luke. Scholars have pointed out these facts. It is now generally accepted that these synoptic gospels are writings not dependent upon each other and that all appeared before the destruction of the temple by Titus. A study of the "triple tradition" has led to the general acceptance of a view that there was a collection embodying the works of Jesus and another containing his words. Scholars differ as to whether these collections represent recollections and so were oral traditions afterwards written down, or whether from the first they were not set down in writings by disciples and used by the synoptic writers. In either event it is assumed by scholars that these memories were gathered together for the benefit of believers in Jesus as the Christ.

Our thesis is that these two earliest collections, one of the deeds of Jesus up to his death and resurrection, the other of the words of Jesus, were written reports made to the legate of Syria, in order that Rome or the legate might have accurate knowledge of the popular religious movement, which Jesus initiated and his followers carried on. The earlier was a report upon the works of Jesus, probably made during the reign of Caligula. It was not irony which led Pontius Pilate to write a title and put it on the cross. "And the writing was JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS." It was not irony, but the blunt way of a Roman procurator to tell all who passed by and saw the crucified Jesus, that such reward, a crucifixion, awaited every pretender to kingship of the Jews, a people who could have no king unless Caesar gave one to them. It was in line with the policy of Rome and indeed it was one of the neces-

sities, which a Roman legate was under, to know accurately the extent of a movement, whose originator emphasized the near approach of a Kingdom of God and whose followers were expectant of the near coming of that kingdom.

The Roman legate was thorough in investigations of this character. He began where danger was most imminent. The Pharisees looked for a king of the house of David and these Pharisees showed their valuation of this advocate of a kingdom of God, this Nazarene, by demanding his crucifixion. Vitellius, the legate of Syria, sent (35 A. D.) Pontius Pilate to Rome that he might answer for the shedding of innocent blood. The legate himself came the next year to Jerusalem and conciliated the Jews by removing the taxes on fruit and restoring the high priest's vestments, which had been kept in the tower of Antonia since the first Herod. Vitellius was in Jerusalem in 37 and administered to the Jews the oath of allegiance to Caligula. The chief religious and most recent agitation among the high priests and the Pharisees had risen from the preaching of John the baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, both of whom were put to death. Jesus in Vitellius' time, had a considerable following; and there were then living in Jerusalem or Judea eleven of his disciples, who were his closest associates. The legate, while in Jerusalem less than a guinguenium from the day of the crucifixion, must have learned much of this sect, who averred the injustice of the crucifixion, laying the blame on the Jews, a sect who proclaimed that Jesus arose from the dead, appeared to his followers, ascended into heaven, promising just before his departure his coming again. Vitellius with his Romanlike vigilance must have determined to investigate this whole matter and learn, whether there was peril for Rome in a sect, which looked for the "kingdom of God," looked for the return of Jesus of Nazareth, of whom a Roman procurator had sanctioned the crucifixion, placing on his cross the writing, "KING OF THE JEWS," thus warning all of the fate awaiting every one making such pretensions. The high priests and Pharisees would encourage the Roman legate to make thorough investigations of these matters.

Vitellius was not concerned at first about the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The works, the remarkable cures, his popular following, were the chief matters of inquiry. Jesus passed most of his public ministry in Galilee. The legate would of course get reports from his own investigators, that he might know impartially the facts. It was very important also to have accurate reports, since a Herod was ruler in the regions where Jesus did most of his work. Per-

haps this Herod was planning independence of Rome and would use this movement to push on his purpose. There were three centers, Tiberias and the region surrounding, Caesarea Philippi and its neighboring towns, Caesarea on the coast and the adjacent parts. These investigators began the search some four years after the occurrences and obtained the facts from the people of these places, not from disciples.

These official reports contained the cause of Christian popular gatherings, the dominant thought controlling the assemblage, the territorial extent of the movement; it left all inference with the legate. There came from the three regions, widely separate, a uniform statement that Jesus of Nazareth healed a great number of persons of their diseases, that he made remarkable cures in each region, that outstanding cases were the healing of the daughter of a Syro-phoenician woman, the healing of a leper in Capernaum. A deaf man was healed somewhere in the district of Decapolis, and a lunatic in Gadera was restored to his right mind, a paralytic was healed in Capernaum. The unusual method of healing and curing was noted in these reports. Another cause of the popularity of Jesus of Nazareth was that he fed with a few loaves of bread and a few fishes a multitude of several thousand, that he commanded the winds and waves of the lake to be calm and they obeyed, that he walked on the lake, and even raised the dead. The facts, striking features of each incident, the locality and the popular impression were recorded in these reports. All reports confirmed the teaching everywhere of the Coming of the Kingdom of God, of the errors of Pharisees and scribes, of the need of a life in each one, that would please the Father, the God of each one, a life every way approvable amid the whirl of the surrounding life which abounded in Jewish, Hellenistic, and Roman customs and manners.

A digest of these several reports was made. As the incidents were narrated by the common people, telling what they remembered, there would be found words that were in the vulgar tongue, and which elegant and educated people would not use. Aramaic expressions would be used and their translation placed after them, making them intelligible to the Roman legate. This interpretative characteristic has given us in these accounts, what has been cleverly characterized as "duality of phrase." An example of this duality is "And at even, when the sun was set." The Greek in these reports is rude and vulgar. In the account of the healing of Jairus's daughter "eschatos echei (at the point of death) is the *canaille* use. The

word *chrab batos* (bed) would be an offense to the cultivated. Instances are many of this characteristic feature, which is ever present because the account of the incidents are gathered from the people. Jairus was ruler of a synagogue, but he was a Hellenist and the language of his household was Hellenistic Greek. These reports had such expressions as the following: "The whole city was gathered at the door." "He could no longer openly enter into the city." "So many came and went, he could not even eat." "They from all the cities ran together on foot." "Wherever he went, into villages of cities or country, they placed their sick before him." This was of course popular exaggeration, evidencing the hold Jesus of Nazareth had upon the people. The only order in this digest of reports, which went to Vitellius, would be an arrangement which would indicate the deeds of Jesus when he was around the Lake of Tiberias or when he went into the coasts of Sidon and Tyre, or when he went into the villages round about Caesarea Philippi. The order of events in each region was only approximate. The principle aim was to show the man Jesus of Nazareth whom they found to be a popular teacher and one who gathered numbers in many places who came to be healed. These crowds also listened to his teaching. The legates comment seems to have been, that the followers of Jesus were an asset to good government and not a menace, that they served as a balance to the Pharisaical Jews, who then wished the removal of procurators and the restoration of the Jewish kingdom, that the coming Kingdom of God had no peril for the sovereignty of Rome. The age of Caligula saw persecution of the Jews; and these Jews persecuted the followers of Jesus, although the Jews in Palestine saw them worship at the temple, use the ancient Jewish scriptures, gather in houses to rehearse the words of Jesus and encourage each other to look for the coming of their Lord.

Caligula was assassinated in 41 and Claudius became emperor. He restored civic rights to the Alexandrian Jew and set Agrippa I upon the throne, giving him all the territories which Herod the Great had governed. Agrippa observed the tradition of the Pharisees and protected the Jewish religion. He put to death James the brother of John; he began to make Jerusalem safer by building walls, he summoned five vassal kings of the empire to conference at Tiberias. The Roman legate prohibited the conference and the construction of the wall. Agrippa died suddenly at Caesarea by the sea. Claudius thereafter governed this whole Jewish kingdom in Palestine by procurators. Cuspius Fadus was the first. He seized Thaddeus, a

prophet and a religious agitator, beheaded him and brought the head to Jerusalem. It was probably under this procurator that the teachings of Jesus was gathered and a detailed statement of the last days of Jesus of Nazareth in Jerusalem and especially the trial and crucifixion of this Nazarene. Fadus probably directed this last enquiry to be made among the scattered followers of Jesus, principally it would seem through Peter. If we remove from the Gospel of Mark the narratives of the works of Jesus, leaving the recitative matter, we will have probably the collection generally referred to as "the Logia of Jesus." The Roman investigators would not seek to obtain the discourses of Jesus, such as are now represented to us in the so-called Sermon on the Mount. These ethico-religious teachings influenced the private life and the conduct of Christians. The investigators sought to obtain the words of Jesus, which made him the object of the wrath of the Pharisees, so that the legate might know and so the emperor, whether the breach between the Pharisees and these assemblies, now under the directive control of the disciples of Jesus could be done away with. These Roman investigators were desirous of knowing more fully the teachings, which bound together Christians, teachings that looked for the establishment of the kingdom of God and the coming again of Jesus. Fadus certainly felt little was to be feared from a sect which was awaiting a time of awful trial for all, wars and rumors of wars; of a sect whose founder commanded them in these days to flee from one city to another, and to look in these terrible days for the "coming of the son of man in his glory."

The view which regards the earliest records of Jesus of Nazareth as reports of Roman investigators to the Roman procurator or legate and so to the Palace at Rome, makes these two documents, one telling of the Works of Jesus and the other of his Words, documents of purely human origin, the only inspiration in them being to make them accurate reports and so avoid censure of the Roman legate. Rome found in the widespread movement of Christians a counterpoise to Judaism, ever plotting for independence of Rome, although it was Rome that had saved the Jew from annihilation by the Ptolemaic and Seleucidian kings. The Christ-movement undermined the supremacy of the ever-present religious legalism among the people, and so Phariseism undertook its extermination. It was the policy of Rome to weaken Phariseism and so the procurator would encourage Christians. The hatred of the Greek for the Jew would make him a natural ally on the side of the Christian. Hence came

a double encouragement to the followers of Jesus and their authoritative leaders, the college of the disciples. Paul at this time was in Antioch or else in the regions north, where Jews from the Mesopotamian valley had been settled by the Seleucidian kings in order to bring into the region of Babylon Greek colonists to put in awe the Semitic natives. Paul carried to these deported Semites as a rabbi the hopeful message of Jesus and the worth of a religious life apart from the fetters of Pharasaic legalism. He proclaimed also the comfort in the near coming again of the risen and ascended Jesus to reward his followers. Paul was a Roman citizen and so Roman governors would encourage his teaching, at least insofar as not to let it be prohibited. A little more than a decade from the date of Fadus the Jew Paul became an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ and travelled through Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, heralding to Jew and Gentile alike "the unsearchable riches" of Christ. Paul then wrote letters to "churches." It is remarkable, that in these epistles scarcely any references are made to the works of Christ Jesus and only very few to his words. The "risen Lord" was uppermost in his thought and the superiority of the gospel of the "crucified Christ" was everywhere published. Faith in Jesus Christ displaced belief in and the practise of Judaism. It is not credible that the words and works of Jesus of Nazareth were unknown to the churches. There must have been collections of these words and works among the churches, so that the public ministry of Jesus was from the first well known. Our theory of public documents containing these words and works, compiled for the information of Roman procurators and legates, would make it not difficult for this general knowledge of Jesus to be in the possession of the churches. It would be to the interest of Rome to have spread abroad these facts about Jesus among his followers. Such collections would not be forbidden if the compilation had their source in Roman authority. They would also have very great authority in the churches themselves. Probably the collection of the works of Jesus had the first and more general circulation. Later, perhaps some fifteen years, Mark combined both documents in the gospel which we now know as St. Mark's.

Scientific historical criticism makes it clear, that the excellence of any teaching and the worthiness and suffering of any leader whether in religion or politics, in no way decides its survival. More Jews suffered crucifixion for their religion in the first three-fourths of the first century than Christians. Adaptation to environment or

a conqueror's sword determines converts. Adaptation to environment does not mean accommodation to the vices of a people in the case of Jesus of Nazareth. His message as by a tempest carried away vices from the individual, who followed him. The environment in the day of Jesus was a loose assemblage of national units under the sway of a dominant power, which stood for a peaceful empire and tribute paying subjects. Woe to the disturbers of peace, equal woe to him who refused tribute. The proletariat were the sufferers. Ceaseless toilers and no benefit from labor; sleep came to them from weariness, not from restful repose. They were hopeless. The environment was slavery or its equivalent. The adaptation would be to give this proletariat outlook. The message of Jesus of Nazareth wrought this miracle. It was not to be accomplished by revolution. It was to be done by a reformation of each individual so that his body became a temple of God, sin not dwelling therein; he was not to labor less in the struggle for a living, but more because he must look to helping his neighbor carry his burden. The assemblies of the followers of Jesus were inspired with encouragement to produce wholesome and helpful human lives. They were not revolutionary gathering. All this new endeavor amid the crushing burdens of the proletariat's conditions was actuated by the faith that in this way they pleased God.

The Roman legate or procurator would analyze the report upon the Works of Jesus on this wise. If this crucified teacher commanded the tempest or walked on the sea, so few saw it that it would generally be regarded as an idle tale. If he fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes it was cheaper than agrarian laws, but the Roman governors would hardly credit the occurrence. They would regard it as most philanthropic, that a great physician should heal without fee large numbers in widely separated regions and would readily concede, that the teachings of Jesus would therefore receive hearing. These governors would learn that individuals from the proletariat were leaders in this sect, the most prominent of whom were fishermen, that these followers of Jesus believed in his resurrection and ascension and his return. And so, the kingdom of God in their view had no peril for Rome. It was after the death of Agrippa, king of the Jews, and so after the second undertaking to rule the Jews by procurators, that agitation for independence became acute among the Jews and events began to move fast toward revolution. The Roman governors therefore looked with encouraging tolerance upon the growing assemblies of Christians. Judaism sought

to obliterate the schism made in its body politic by the Christ movement, which threatened its hold through its legalism and its synagogues upon the people. The Jews would emphasize before the Roman governors the fact that Jesus was crucified because he did not deny that he was king of the Jews, that his followers were members of a kingdom, styled the Kingdom of God. But the procurator Fadus who had investigated the reports made to him upon the saying of Jesus and the last days of Jesus, found no reason for exterminating the Christian assemblies. Saul and Barnabas at this time were Christians (meaning followers of Jesus) but not apostolic teachers of the faith; they had not been "separated for this work." But at this time (if we accept the theory that the earliest writings among the Christians were political documents, put together for the information of the legate and the procurator of Rome), the Christian assemblies, mostly Jews, had furnished to them copies of these writings and so Christians were well acquainted with the events and the teaching connected with Jesus of Nazareth. Later there was no need of Paul referring to the works and teachings of Jesus, for they were well known. Other gospels, which were written later, would of course have as a large element in them these earlier political documents.