

The Gospels

by F.F Bruce

The sermon explores the origins and trustworthiness of the Gospels, with a focus on the Synoptic Gospels and the Markan Hypothesis.

Scripture: Mark 1:1, Mark 8:27, John 1:1-4

Topics: "Gospel Origins", "Jesus Christ"

Description

F.F. Bruce preaches about the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, highlighting the historical evidence, origin, trustworthiness, and unique characteristics of each Gospel. He emphasizes the early pursuit of Gospel origins, the importance of eyewitnesses, and the value of understanding the sources behind the Gospels. F.F. Bruce discusses the similarities and differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, addressing geographical, chronological, and stylistic variations. He explores the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels, focusing on His messianic identity, humanity, and self-disclosure, while emphasizing the eternal truth and relevance of the gospel message.

Transcript

I. The Synoptic Gospels

We now come to a more detailed examination of the Gospels. We have already indicated some of the evidence for their date and early attestation; we must now see what can be said about their origin and trustworthiness. The study of Gospel origins has been pursued with unflagging eagerness almost from the beginning of Christianity itself. Early in the second century we find Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, gathering information on this and kindred subjects from Christians of an earlier generation than his own, men who had conversed with the apostles themselves. About AD 130-140 Papias wrote a work in five books (now lost except for a few fragments quoted by other writers), entitled *An Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*, in the preface to which he says:

'But I will not hesitate to set down for you alongside my interpretations all that I ever learned well from the elder and remembered well, guaranteeing their truth. For I did not, like the majority, rejoice in those who say most, but in those who teach the truth; nor in those who record the commandments of others, but in those who relate the commandments given by the Lord to faith, and proceeding from Him who is the truth. Also, if ever a person came my way who had been a companion of the elders, I would inquire about the saying of the elders-what was said by Andrew, or by Peter, or by Philip, or by Thomas or James, or by John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples; and' what things Aristion and the elder John, the

disciple of the Lord, say. For I did not suppose that what I could get from books was of such great value to me as the utterance' of a living and abiding voice."

Among the many things he learned from these elders and their associates was some information about the origins of the Gospels, which we shall look at shortly.

And from his days to our own men have pursued much the same quest, attempting not only to find out as much as possible from external and internal evidence about the writing of the Gospels, but trying also to get behind them to find out what they can about the sources which may lie behind the Gospels as they have come down to us. Of the fascination of this study, 'Source Criticism' as it is called, there can be no doubt. But the quest for Gospel sources and their hypothetical reconstruction may prove so engrossing that the student is apt to forget that the actual Gospels which have come down to us as literary units from the first century are necessarily more important than the putative documents which may be divined as their sources, if only because the latter have disappeared, if they ever existed, while the former have remained to our own day. And we must also remember that Source Criticism, interesting as it is, must necessarily lead to much less assured results than Textual Criticism, because it has to admit a much larger speculative element.

But provided that we bear in mind the limitations of this kind of literary criticism, there is considerable value in an inquiry into the sources of our Gospels. If the dates suggested for their composition in an earlier chapter are anything like correct, then no very long space of time separated the recording of the evangelic events from the events themselves. If, however, it can be shown with reasonable probability that these records themselves depend in whole or in part on still earlier documents then the case for the trustworthiness of the gospel narrative is all the stronger.

Certain conclusions may be reached by a comparative study of the Gospels themselves. We are not long before we see that the Gospels fall naturally into two groups, the first three on one side, and the fourth Gospel by itself on the other. We shall revert to the problem of the fourth Gospel later, but for the present we must look at the other three, which are called the 'Synoptic' Gospels because they lent themselves to a synoptic arrangement, a form in which the three may be studied together.' It requires no very detailed study to discover that these three have a considerable amount of material in common. We find, for example, that the substance of 606 out of the 661 verses of Mark appears in Matthew, and that some 350 of Mark's verses reappear with little material change in Luke. Or, to put it another way, out of the 1,068 verses of Matthew, about 500 contain material also found in Mark; of the 1,149 verses of Luke, about 350 are paralleled in Mark. Altogether, there are only 31 verses in Mark which have no parallel either in Matthew or Luke.

When we compare Matthew and Luke by themselves, we find that these two have about 250 verses containing common material not paralleled in Mark. This common material is cast in language which is sometimes practically identical in Matthew and Luke, and sometimes shows considerable divergence. We are then left with some 300 verses in Matthew containing narratives and discourses peculiar to that Gospel, and about 550 verses in Luke containing matter not found in the other Gospels.

These are facts which are easily ascertained; speculation enters when we try to explain them. Sometimes the material common to two or more of the Synoptists is so verbally identical that the identity can hardly be accidental. In this country the explanation commonly given last century was that the identity or similarity of language was due to the fact that the evangelists reproduced the language of the primitive oral gospel

which was proclaimed in the early days of the Church. This is the view put forward, for example, in Alford's Greek Testament and in Westcott's Introduction to the Study of the Gospels. This theory later fell into disfavour, as it was realised that many of the phenomena could be more adequately explained by postulating documentary sources; but there was and is a great deal to be said for it, and it has reappeared in our own day in a somewhat different form in the approach known as Form Criticism.

Form Criticism aims at recovering the oral 'forms' or 'patterns' or 'moulds' in which the apostolic preaching and teaching were originally cast, even before the circulation of such documentary sources as may lie behind our Gospels. This method of approach has become popular since 1918, and its value has been exaggerated in some quarters, but one or two conclusions of importance emerge from it. One is that the hypothesis of documentary sources by itself is as inadequate to account for all the facts as was the 'oral theory' in the form propounded by Alford and Westcott; indeed, much of the recent popularity of Form Criticism may be due to dissatisfaction with the meagre results of a century's diligent pursuit of Source Criticism.

Another important point which is emphasised by Form Criticism is the universal tendency in ancient times to stereotype the 'forms' in which religious preaching and teaching were cast. This tendency can be widely traced in the ancient Gentile and Jewish world, and it is also manifest in our gospel material. In the days of the apostles there was a largely stereotyped preaching of the deeds and words of Jesus, originally in Aramaic but soon in Greek as well; and this preaching or oral tradition lies behind our Synoptic Gospels and their documentary sources.

We do not like stereotyped oral or literary styles; we prefer variety. But there are occasions on which a stereotyped style is insisted upon even in modern life. When, for example, a police officer gives evidence in court, he does not adorn his narrative with the graces of oratory, but adheres as closely as he can to a prescribed and stereotyped 'form'. The object of this is that the evidence he gives may conform as closely as possible to the actual course of events which he describes. What his narrative lacks in artistic finish, it gains in accuracy. The stereotyped style of many of the Gospel narratives and discourses serves the same end; it is a guarantee of their substantial accuracy. It frequently happens that, because of this preservation of a definite 'form', the reports of similar incidents or similar sayings will be given in much the same language and constructed on much the same framework. But we must not infer from this similarity of language and framework that two similar narratives are duplicate accounts of one and the same event, or that two similar parables (e.g. the wedding feast of Matthew xxii. 2 ff. and the great supper of Luke xiv. 16 ff.) are necessarily variant versions of one and the same parable, any more than we should conclude that, because a police officer describes two street accidents in almost identical language, he is really giving two variant accounts of one and the same street accident.

But perhaps the most important result to which Form Criticism points is that, no matter how far back we may press our researches into the roots of the gospel story, no matter how we classify the gospel material, we never arrive at a nonsupernatural Jesus. The classification of our gospel material according to 'form' is by no means the most convenient or illuminating classification, but it adds a new method of grouping the material to others already known, and we are then able to see that this fresh classification yields the same result as the others, the classifications, e.g., by source or by subject-matter. All parts of the gospel record are shown by these various groupings to be pervaded by a consistent picture of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God; all agree in emphasising the messianic significance of all that He said and did, and we can find no alternative picture, no matter how thoroughly we scrutinise and analyse successive strata of the Gospels. Thus Form Criticism has added its contribution to the overthrow of the hope once fondly held

that by getting back to the most primitive stage of gospel tradition we might recover a purely human Jesus, who simply taught the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

The Gospel of Mark, because it was shorter than the others, and contained little that could not be found in them, was unduly neglected in ancient times. Augustine, for example, says that Mark seems to have followed Matthew 'as his lackey and abbreviator, so to speak'. But anyone who studies a synopsis of the Gospels where the common material is arranged in parallel columns will see that for the most part it is Matthew and not Mark who abridges. Mark, of course, omits more than half the material which appears in Matthew; but for the material which they have in common Mark is usually fuller than Matthew. Closer study of the linguistic and literary details of the Gospels in more recent times has led many scholars to the conclusion that Mark was actually the oldest of our Synoptic Gospels in their final form, and that it was a source of both Matthew and Luke. This 'Markan hypothesis' as it is called, was adumbrated in the eighteenth century, but was first set on a stable basis by Carl Lachmann in 1835, when he showed that the common order of the three Synoptists is the order of Mark, since Mark and Matthew sometimes agree in order against Luke, and Mark and Luke still more frequently against Matthew, while Matthew and Luke never agree in order against Mark. Mark thus seems in this respect to be the norm from which the other two occasionally deviate. To this must be added the fact that most of the Markan subject matter reappears in Matthew and Luke, with a considerable part of the actual language of Mark preserved, and that on grounds of literary criticism the differences in the presentation of common material between Mark on the one hand and Matthew and Luke on the other seem to be more easily accounted for by the priority of Mark than by the priority of Matthew or Luke. But while the Markan hypothesis is still the remnant hypothesis, it has been assailed by writers of great scholarship and ability. Thus the Great German scholar Theodor von Zahn held that Matthew first composed his Gospel in Aramaic, that our Greek Mark was then composed in partial dependence on the Aramaic Matthew, and that the Aramaic Matthew was then turned into Greek with the aid of the Greek Mark. Less complicated than Zahn's account is the view expressed by the Roman Catholic writers Dom John Chapman, *Matthew, Mark and Luke* (1937), and Dom B. C. Butler, *The Originality of St. Matthew's Gospel* (1951), which turns the Markan hypothesis on its head and argues for the dependence of the Greek Mark and Luke on the Greek Matthew.

The strength of the Markan hypothesis cannot be conveyed in a sentence or two; the evidence is cumulative, and can best be appreciated by studying a good synopsis (preferably Greek, but much of the evidence is apparent even in an up-to-date English translation), where the three Gospels have their parallel passages arranged alongside each other in a form free from prejudice in favour of any one hypothesis. Along with such a synopsis, Greek students should examine the linguistic data as marshalled by Sir John Hawkins in his *Hora Synoptica* (2nd edition, 1909).

It is not so surprising as might at first appear to find Mark, or something very like it, used as a source by the other two Synoptists, when we consider what Mark really is. Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History* (iii. 39), preserves for us a few sentences in which Papias tells us the account of the origin of this Gospel which he received from one whom he refers to as 'the Elder':

'Mark, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he [Peter] mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ; not, however, in order. For he was neither a hearer nor a companion of the Lord; but afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who adapted his teachings as necessity required, not as though he were making a compilation of the sayings of the Lord. So then Mark made no mistake, writing down in this way some things as he [Peter] mentioned them; for he paid attention to this one thing, not to omit anything that he had heard, nor to include any false statement among them.'

This account has received illumination from a new angle of recent years. Some Form Critics, attempting to get behind the second Gospel, have envisaged it as consisting amply of independent stories and sayings which had been transmitted orally in the primitive Church, joined together by a sort of editorial cement in the form of generalising summaries which have no historical value. But an examination of these 'generalising summaries' reveals that, far from being editorial inventions, they may be put together to form a consecutive outline of the gospel narrative.' Now, in some of the early summaries of the Christian preaching or 'Kerygma' in Acts, we find similar outlines or partial outlines of the gospel story.' These outlines in the Acts and Epistles cover the period from the preaching of John the Baptist to the resurrection of Christ, with more detailed emphasis on the passion story. But this is exactly the scope of the second Gospel, where, however, the outline is filled in with illustrative incidents in the life of Christ such as would naturally be used in preaching. It appears, then, that Mark is, generally speaking, a statement of the gospel story as it was related in the earliest days of the Church, and, in view of Papias' description of Mark as Peter's interpreter, it is noteworthy that Peter is the chief preacher of the gospel in the early chapters of Acts.

Further confirmation of the Petrine authority behind Mark was supplied in a series of acute linguistic studies by C. H. Turner, entitled 'Marcan Usage', in the journal of Theological Studies for 1924 and 1925, showing, among other things, how Mark's use of pronouns in narratives involving Peter seems time after time to reflect a reminiscence by that apostle in the first person. The reader can receive from such passages 'a vivid impression of the testimony that lies behind the Gospel: thus in i. 29, "we came into our house with James and John, and my wife's mother was ill in bed with a fever, and at once we tell him about her" .

There is, to be sure, much more in Mark's Gospel than Peter's account of the ministry of Jesus. Mark probably includes some reminiscences of his own. He was in all probability the young man who had a narrow escape when Jesus was arrested (Mk. xiv. 51 f.), and for some of the details of the passion narrative he may have drawn upon his own recollection of what he had seen on that occasion. There is a tradition that his parents' house (cf. Acts X11. 12) was the one in which the Last Supper was held.

The view that Mark underlies the other Synoptic Gospels is not so very different in essence from the older view that the common element in the three is the oral preaching current in the early Church; Mark is, by and large, that oral preaching written down. But the form in which the oral preaching underlies Matthew and Luke is the form given to it by Mark, who not only acted as Peter's interpreter (presumably translating Peter's Galilean Aramaic into Greek), but incorporated in his Gospel the substance of the preaching as he heard it from Peter's lips. There is no lack of evidence in his Gospel that much of the material originally existed in Aramaic; his Greek in places preserves the Aramaic idiom quite unmistakably.

Mark's Gospel appears to have been written in the first instance for the Christian community of Rome, in the early sixties of the first century, but it quickly enjoyed a very wide circulation throughout the Church.

The gospel as preached in those early days emphasised what Jesus did rather than what He said. The proclamation which led to the conversion of Jews and Gentiles was the good news that by His death and triumph He had procured remission of sins and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers. But when they became Christians they had much more to learn, and in particular the teaching of Jesus. Now it is striking that the greater part of the non-Markan material common to Matthew and Luke consists of sayings of Jesus.

This has led to the conjecture of another early document on which both Matthew and Luke drew for their common nonMarkan material, the document usually referred to as 'Q', and envisaged as a collection of sayings of Jesus.' Whatever may be the truth about such a document, it will be convenient to use 'Q' as a symbol denoting this non-Markan material common to Matthew and Luke. There is evidence in the Greek of this 'Q' material that it has been translated from Aramaic, and possibly from an Aramaic document, not merely from an Aramaic oral tradition.

Aramaic is known to have been the common language of Palestine, and especially of Galilee, in the time of Christ, and was in all probability the language which He and His apostles habitually spoke. The New Testament writers usually call it 'Hebrew', thus not distinguishing in name between it and its sister language in which most of the Old Testament was written. Now, we have evidence of an early Aramaic document in another fragment of Papias: 'Matthew compiled the Logia in the "Hebrew" speech [i.e. Aramaic], and every one translated them as best he could.'

Various suggestions have been made as to the meaning of this term 'Logia', which literally means 'oracles'; but the most probable explanation is that it refers to a collection of our Lord's sayings. It is used in the New Testament of the oracles communicated through the Old Testament prophets, and Jesus was regarded by His followers as 'a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people.' Now, when an attempt is made to isolate the document underlying the 'Q' material in Matthew and Luke, it appears to have been constructed very much on the lines of one of the prophetic books of the Old Testament.

These books commonly contain an account of the prophet's call to his distinctive ministry, with a record of his oracles set in a narrative framework, but no mention of the prophet's death. So this document, when reconstructed on the evidence provided by Matthew and Luke's Gospels, is seen to begin with an account of Jesus' baptism by John and His temptation in the wilderness, which formed the prelude to His Galilean ministry, followed by groups of His sayings set in a minimum of narrative framework, but it evidently did not tell the story of His passion. His teaching is set forth in four main groupings, which may be entitled: (a) Jesus and John the Baptist; (b) Jesus and His disciples; (c) Jesus and His opponents; (d) Jesus and the future.'

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Papias was referring to just such a work as this when he said that Matthew compiled the Logia. His further statement, that the Logia were compiled in the 'Hebrew speech', accords with the internal evidence that an Aramaic substratum underlies the 'Q' material in Matthew and Luke. And when he adds that every man translated these Logia as best he could, this suggests that several Greek versions of them were current, which partly explains some of the differences in the sayings of Jesus common to the first and third Gospels; for in many places where the Greek of these Gospels differs, it can be shown that one and the same Aramaic original underlies the variant Greek renderings.

Another interesting fact which comes to light when we try to reconstruct the original Aramaic in which our Lord's sayings in all the Gospels were spoken is that very many of these sayings exhibit poetical features. Even in a translation we can see how full they are of parallelism, which is so constant a mark of Old Testament poetry. When they are turned into Aramaic, however, they are seen to be marked by regular poetical rhythm, and even, at times, rhyme. This has been demonstrated in particular by the late Professor C. F. Burney in *The Poetry of our Lord* (1925). A discourse that follows a recognisable pattern is more easily memorised, and if Jesus wished His teaching to be memorised His use of poetry is easily explained. Besides, Jesus was recognised by His contemporaries as a prophet, and prophets in Old Testament days

were accustomed to utter their oracles in poetical form. Where this form has been preserved, we have a further assurance that His teaching has been handed down to us as it was originally given.

So, just as we have found reason to see the authority of contemporary evidence behind the gospel narrative as preserved by Mark, the sayings of our Lord appear to be supported by similar trustworthy authority. But, in addition to the discourses in Matthew which have some parallel in Luke, there are others occurring in the first Gospel only, which may conveniently be denoted by the letter 'M'. These 'M' sayings have been envisaged as coming from another collection of the sayings of Jesus, largely parallel to the collection represented by 'Q', but compiled and preserved in the conservative Jewish Christian community of Jerusalem, whereas the 'Q' material more probably served the requirements of the Hellenistic Christians who left Jerusalem after Stephen's death to spread the gospel and plant churches in the provinces adjoining Palestine, and notably in Syrian Antioch.

If we are right in naming the Matthaean Logia as the source from which the 'Q' material was drawn, this compilation must have taken shape at an early point in primitive Christian history. Certainly it would be most helpful for new converts, and especially Gentile converts, to have such a compendium of the teaching of Jesus. It may well have been in existence by AD 50. Some scholars have suggested that even Mark shows some traces of it in his Gospel, but this is uncertain.

The Gospel of Matthew seems to have appeared in the neighbourhood of Syrian Antioch some time after AD 70. It represents the substance of the apostolic preaching as recorded by Mark, expanded by the incorporation of other narrative material, and combined with a Greek version of the Matthaean Logia together with sayings of Jesus derived from other quarters. All this material has been arranged so as to serve the purpose of a manual for teaching and administration within the Church. The sayings of Jesus are arranged so as to form five great discourses, dealing respectively with (a) the law of the kingdom of God (chapters v to vii), (b) the preaching of the kingdom (x. 5-42), (c) the growth of the kingdom (xiii. 3-52), (d) the fellowship of the kingdom (chapter xviii), and (e) the consummation of the kingdom (chapter xxiv-xxv). The narrative of the ministry of Jesus is so arranged that each section leads on naturally to the discourse which follows it. The whole is prefaced by a prologue describing the nativity of the King (chapters i-ii) and concluded by an epilogue relating the passion and triumph of the King (chapters xxvi-xxviii).

The fivefold structure of this Gospel is probably modelled on the fivefold structure of the Old Testament law; it is presented as the Christian Torah (which means 'direction or 'instruction' rather than 'law' in the more restricted sense). The Evangelist is also at pains to show how the story of Jesus represents the fulfilment of the Old Testament Scriptures, and in places he even implies that the experiences of Jesus recapitulate the experiences of the people of Israel in Old Testament times. Thus, just as the children of Israel went down into Egypt in their national infancy and came out of it at the Exodus, so Jesus in His infancy must also go down to Egypt and come out of it, that the words spoken of them in Hosea xi. 1 might be fulfilled in His experience, too: 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (Mt. ii. 15).

While some of the sayings of Jesus found in Luke are almost verbally identical with their Matthaean counterparts (cf. Lk. x. 21 f. with Mt. xi. 25-27), and others are reasonably similar, some show considerable differences, and it is unnecessary to suppose that for these last the first and third evangelists depended on one and the same documentary source. It is unlikely, for example, that the Matthaean and Lucan versions of the Beatitudes are drawn from one document (cf. Mt. v. 3 ff. with Lk. vi. 20 ff.). We have Luke's own statement that many had undertaken to draw up a narrative of the gospel history (Lk. i. 1), and

it is unnecessarily narrowing the field to suppose that all the nonMarkan material common in one form or another to Matthew and Luke must have been derived from one written source. To all appearances Luke was acquainted at a fairly early date with the Matthaean Logia, evidently in one or more of its Greek versions. But he had other sources of information, and to them in particular he was indebted for those narratives and parables which give his Gospel its special charm and beauty. To this material peculiar to Luke we may conveniently assign the symbol 'L'.

Early tradition asserts that Luke was a native of Antioch. If so, he had opportunities of learning many things from the founders of the Antiochene church, the first Gentile church (Acts xi. 19ff.); he may even have met Peter, who once paid a visit there (Gal. ii. 11ff.). He shows a special interest in the Herod family: was this due to his acquaintance with Manaen, fosterbrother of Herod Antipas and one of the teachers in the church of Antioch (Acts xiii. 1)? Then he must have learned much from Paul. Though Paul had not been a follower of Jesus before the crucifixion, yet he must have made it his business after his conversion to learn as much about Him as he could (see chapter vi). What did Peter and Paul talk about during the fortnight they spent together in Jerusalem about AD 35 (Gal. i. 18)? As Professor Dodd puts it, 'we may presume they did not spend all the time talking about the weather.' It was a golden opportunity for Paul to learn the details of the story of Jesus from one whose knowledge of that story was unsurpassed.

Again, Luke seems to have spent two years in or near Palestine during Paul's last visit to Jerusalem and detention in Caesarea (cf. Acts xxiv. 27). These years afforded him unique opportunities of increasing his knowledge of the story of Jesus and of the early Church. On one occasion at least, he is known to have met James, the brother of Jesus; and he may have seized other opportunities of making the acquaintance of members of the holy family. Some of his special material reflects an oral Aramaic tradition, which Luke received from various Palestinian informants, while other parts of it were evidently derived from Christian Hellenists. In particular, there is reason to believe that much of the information which Luke used for the third Gospel and Acts was derived from Philip and his family in Caesarea (cf. Acts xxi. 8 f.). Eusebius tells us on the authority of Papias and other early writers that at a later date Philip's four prophetic daughters were famed in the Church as authorities for the history of its earliest days.

The account of the nativities of John the Baptist and Jesus in the first two chapters of the Gospel has been described as the most archaic passage in the New Testament; it breathes the atmosphere of a humble and holy Palestinian community which cherished ardent hopes of the early fulfilment of God's ancient promises to His people Israel, and saw in the birth of these two children a sign that their hopes were about to be realized. To this community belonged Mary and Joseph, with the parents of John the Baptist, and Simeon and Anna, who greeted the presentation of the infant Christ in the temple at Jerusalem, and later on Joseph of Arimathea, 'who was looking for the kingdom of God' (Lk. xxiii. 51).

After Paul's two years of detention in Caesarea, Luke went with him to Rome, and there we find him in Paul's company along with Mark about the year 60 (Col. iv. 10, 14; Phm. 24). His contact with Mark there is sufficient to account for his evident indebtedness to Mark's narrative. This summary of the way in which the third Gospel may have been built up is based on biblical evidence, and it accords very well with the internal data, evaluated by literary criticism which suggests that Luke first enlarged his version of the Matthaean Logia by adding the information he acquired from various sources, especially in Palestine. This first draft, 'Q' + 'L', has been called 'ProtoLuke', though there is no evidence that it was ever published separately. It was subsequently amplified by the insertion at appropriate points of blocks of material derived from Mark, especially where the Markan material did not overlap the material already collected, and thus our third Gospel was produced. Luke tells us in the preface to his Gospel that he had followed

the whole course of events accurately from the beginning, and he evidently did this by having recourse to the best authorities he could find' and then arranging his material after the manner of a trained historian."

Luke's arrival with Paul in Rome suggests itself as a fitting occasion for Luke's taking in hand to draw up his orderly and reliable account of Christian beginnings. If the official and cultured classes of Rome knew anything of Christianity before, they probably dismissed it as a disreputable eastern cult; but the presence in the city of a Roman citizen, who had appealed to Caesar for a fair hearing in a case which involved the whole question of the character and aims of Christianity, made it necessary for some members of these classes to examine Christianity seriously. The 'most excellent Theophilus', to whom Luke dedicated his twofold history, was possibly one of those who were charged with investigating the situation, and such a work as Luke's, even in a preliminary draft, would have been an invaluable document in the case.

We must never fall into the error of thinking that when we have come to a conclusion about the sources of a literary work we have learned all that needs to be known about it. Source Criticism is merely a preliminary piece of spadework. Who would think that we have said all that is to be said about one of Shakespeare's historical plays when we have discovered what its sources were? So also, whatever their sources were, the Gospels are there before our eyes, each an individual literary work with its own characteristic viewpoint which has in large measure controlled the choice and presentation of the subject matter. In attempting to discover how they were composed, we must beware of regarding them as scissors and paste compilations.

Each of them was written in the first instance for a definite constituency, with the object of presenting Jesus of Nazareth as Son of God and Saviour. Mark entitles his work 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God', and towards the end we find a Roman centurion confessing at the foot of the cross, 'Truly this man was the Son of God' (Mk. xv. 39). We may imagine how effective this testimony must have been in Rome, where this Gospel was first published. Luke, the Gentile physician, inheriting the traditions of Greek historical writing, composes his work after diligent research in order that his readers may know the secure basis of the account of Christian origins which they have received, and withal infuses into it such a spirit of broad human sympathy that many have been constrained to pronounce his Gospel, with Ernest Renan, 'the most beautiful book in the world'. Matthew's Gospel occupies by right its place at the head of the New Testament canon; what other book could so fittingly form the link between the Old and New Testaments as that which proclaims itself, in language reminiscent of the first book of the Old Testament canon, 'The book of the generation of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham,'? Although it has been called the most Jewish of the Gospels, yet it is devoid of any national particularism or religious exclusiveness, for this is the Gospel which ends with the rejected but vindicated King of Israel's commission to His servants: 'Go and make disciples of all the nations' (Mt. xxviii. 19).

The evidence indicates that the written sources of our Synoptic Gospels are not later than c. AD 60; some of them may even be traced back to notes taken of our Lord's teaching while His words were actually being uttered. The oral sources go back to the very beginning of Christian history. We are, in fact, practically all the way through in touch with the evidence of eyewitnesses. The earliest preachers of the gospel knew the value of this firsthand testimony, and appealed to it time and again. 'We are witnesses of these things,' was their constant and confident assertion. And it can have been by no means so easy as some writers seem to think to invent words and deeds of Jesus in those early years, when so many of His disciples were about, who could remember what had and had not happened. Indeed, the evidence is that the early Christians were careful to distinguish between sayings of Jesus and their own inferences or

judgments. Paul, for example, when discussing the vexed questions of marriage and divorce in I Corinthians vii, is careful to make this distinction between his own advice on the subject and the Lord's decisive ruling: 'I, not the Lord,' and again, 'Not I, but the Lord.'

And it was not only friendly eyewitnesses that the early preachers had to reckon with; there were others less well disposed who were also conversant with the main facts of the ministry and death of Jesus. The disciples could not afford to risk inaccuracies (not to speak of wilful manipulation of the facts), which would at once be exposed by those who would be only too glad to do so. On the contrary, one of the strong points in the original apostolic preaching is the confident appeal to the knowledge of the hearers; they not only said, 'We are witnesses of these things,' but also, 'As you yourselves also know' (Acts ii. 22). Had there been any tendency to depart from the facts in any material respect, the possible presence of hostile witnesses in the audience would have served as a further corrective.

We have then in the Synoptic Gospels, the latest of which was complete between forty and fifty years after the death of Christ, material which took shape at a still earlier time, some of it even before His death, and which, besides being for the most part firsthand evidence, was transmitted along independent and trustworthy lines. The Gospels in which this material is embodied agree in their presentation of the basic facts of the Christian faith—a threefold cord not quickly broken.

2. The Fourth Gospel

In his *Argument to the Gospel of John*, the great Reformer John Calvin says: 'I am in the habit of saying that this Gospel is the key which opens the door to the understanding of the others.' His opinion has been endorsed by Christian thinkers of many ages, who have found in this Gospel depths of spiritual truth unreached in any other New Testament writing. To the question whether the discourses in this Gospel are genuine words of Christ, not a few would reply that, if they are not, then a greater than Christ is here.

Yet, during the last hundred years especially, the fourth Gospel has been the centre of unending disputes. People talk about the enigma of the fourth Gospel, and what is confidently accepted by one side as an adequate solution is with equal confidence rejected by another side as untenable. This is not the place to undertake a fresh solution; it must suffice to mention some of the most important facts bearing on this Gospel's historicity.

The claim of the Gospel itself is that it was written by an eyewitness. In the last chapter we read of a resurrection appearance of Jesus by the Sea of Galilee, at which seven disciples were present, including one who is called 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. A note at the end of the chapter tells us: 'This is the disciple who testifies of these things and who wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true' (Jn. xxi. 24). It is not quite clear who are the 'we' who thus add their testimony to the evangelist's veracity; they were probably the group of friends and disciples associated with him who were responsible for the editing and publication of his Gospel. This 'disciple whom Jesus loved' is mentioned also as one of the company at the Last Supper (xiii. 23), as being present at the crucifixion (xix. 26), and as an eyewitness, in Peter's company, of the empty tomb on the resurrection morning (xx. 2 ff.). Do these passages give us any clue to his identity?

According to Mark xiv. 17, when our Lord arrived at the upper room for the Last Supper, He was accompanied by the twelve apostles, who reclined at table with Him, and there is no suggestion in the Synoptic Gospels that anyone else was present with Him on that occasion. We conclude, therefore, that the 'beloved disciple' was one of the twelve. Now, of the twelve, there were three who were on occasion

admitted to more intimate fellowship with the Master - Peter, James and John. It was these three, for example, whom He took to keep watch with Him during His vigil in Gethsemane after the Last Supper (Mk. xiv. 33). We should naturally expect that the beloved disciple would be one of the number. He was not Peter, from whom he is explicitly distinguished in xiii. 24, xx. 2 and xxi. 20. There remain the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, who were included in the seven of chapter xxi. But James was martyred not later than AD 44 (Acts xii. 2), and therefore there was little likelihood that the saying should go abroad about him which went abroad about the beloved disciple, that he would not die. So we are left with John.

Now it is noteworthy that John is not mentioned by name in the fourth Gospel (nor yet is his brother James). It has also been pointed out that while the other evangelists refer to John the Baptist as John the Baptist, the fourth evangelist refers to him simply as John. An author will take care to distinguish two characters in his narrative who bear the same name; he will not be so careful to distinguish one of his characters from himself. The fourth evangelist himself distinguishes Judas Iscariot from Judas 'not Iscariot' (xiv. 22). It is significant, therefore, that he does not distinguish John the Baptist from John the apostle, of whom he must have known, though he does not mention him by name.

In general, the internal evidence reveals an author who was an eyewitness of the events he describes. It is interesting in this connection to quote the verdict of Miss Dorothy Sayers, who approached the subject from the standpoint of a creative artist: 'It must be remembered that, of the four Gospels, St. John's is the only one that claims to be the direct report of an eyewitness. And to any one accustomed to the imaginative handling of documents, the internal evidence bears out this claim.' Even the miraculous narratives in the Gospel exhibit this quality. Thus, for example, the late A. T. Olmstead, Professor of Ancient Oriental History in the University of Chicago, finds the story of the raising of Lazarus in chapter xi. to have 'all the circumstantial detail of the convinced eyewitness', while the narrative of the empty tomb in chapter xx is 'told by an un-doubted eyewitness-full of life, and lacking any detail to which the sceptic might take justifiable objection'.

The evangelist was evidently a Palestinian. Although he may have been far from his native land when he wrote his Gospel, his accurate knowledge of places and distances in Palestine, a knowledge which appears spontaneously and naturally, strongly suggests one who was born and brought up in that land, not one whose knowledge of the country was derived from pilgrim visits. He knows Jerusalem well; he fixes the location of certain places in the city with the accuracy of one who must have been acquainted with it before its destruction in AD 70.

The author was also a Jew; he is thoroughly conversant with Jewish customs; he refers to their purification rites (ii. 6) and their manner of burial (xix. 40). Of their feasts, he mentions the Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Feast of Dedication, held in winter, together with the unnamed feast of v. 1 which was probably the Feast of the New Year.' He shows himself intimately acquainted with the Old Testament passages which the Palestinian Jewish lectionary prescribed for reading in synagogue at the festivals and other periods of the year. He knows the Jewish law of evidence (viii. 17). He is familiar with the superior attitude of those who had received a rabbinical training towards those who had not enjoyed this advantage-'These people who do not know the Law are accursed' (vii. 49)-an attitude expressed even by the liberal Rabbi Hillel: 'No ignorant person is pious.' He had been accused of the crass error of supposing that a high priest of the Jews held office for only a year; but when in his passion narrative he refers to Caiaphas as 'high priest that year' (xi. 49, 51, xviii. 13) he simply means that he was high priest in the fateful year of Jesus' crucifixion.

John's accurate knowledge of Jewish customs, beliefs, and methods of argument led a great rabbinical scholar, the late Israel Abrahams, to say: 'My own general impression, without asserting an early date for the Fourth Gospel, is that the Gospel enshrines a genuine tradition of an aspect of Jesus' teaching which has not found a place in the Synoptics.' Abrahams also emphasized 'the cumulative strength of the arguments adduced by Jewish writers favourable to the authenticity of the discourses in the Fourth Gospel, especially in relation to the circumstances under which they are reported to have been spoken.

The internal evidence supports the claim that the author not only witnessed but understood the great events which he records. The external evidence for the Gospel is as strong as for the Synoptics. We have already mentioned the papyrus evidence which attests its early date. Ignatius, whose martyrdom took place about AD 115, was influenced by the distinctive teaching of this Gospel; and Polycarp, writing to the Philippian church shortly after Ignatius' martyrdom, quotes the First Epistle of John, which, in the opinion of Lightfoot, Westcott and others, accompanied the Gospel as a covering letter, and is in any case closely related to it. The Gnostic Basilides (c. AD 130) cites John i. 9 as 'in the Gospels'. Justin Martyr (c. AD 150) quotes from the Nicodemus story of John iii. His disciple Tatian (c. AD 170) included the fourth Gospel in his Diatessaron. About the same time Melito, bishop of Sardis, shows dependence on this Gospel in his Easter Homily.

Apart from these early evidences of the existence of the fourth Gospel, we find in several second century writers observations on its authorship. In the last quarter of that century Irenaeus, who had connections with both Asia Minor and Gaul, Clement of Alexandria, Theophilus of Antioch, Tertullian of Carthage, and the Gnostic Heracleon in Italy, the earliest known commentator on the fourth Gospel, attest the generally held belief that the author was John.'

Of these witnesses the most important is Irenaeus. 'John, the disciple of the Lord,' he says, 'the same who reclined upon His breast, himself also published his Gospel, when he was living in Ephesus in Asia.' Elsewhere he refers to him as 'the apostle'.' Again, in his letter to Florinus, Irenaeus reminds him of their early days when they had sat at the feet of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (who was martyred in AD 156 when he had been a Christian for eightysix years). Polycarp in his turn had been a disciple of John, and Irenaeus and Florinus had often heard him speak of what John and other eyewitnesses told him about Christ.

Other evidence about the authorship of the Gospel is found towards the end of the second century in the Muratorian Fragment and in the antiMarcionite prologue to the fourth Gospel. The former document tells this strange story:

"John one of the disciples, wrote the fourth of the gospel,. When his fellowdisciples and bishops urged him, he said: "Fast along with me for three days, and then let us relate to one another what shall be revealed to each." The same night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that John should write down everything in his own name, and that they should all revise it."

Andrew was certainly not alive at the time referred to. But the fragment may preserve a true tradition that several persons were concerned in the production of the Gospel, for we think of the men who append their testimonial to the evangelist's record in John xxi. 24: 'we know that his witness is true.'

The other document, the antiMarcionite prologue, which is much more important, runs as follows:

'The gospel of John was published and given to the churches by John when he was still in the body, as a man of Hierapolis, Papias by name, John's dear disciple, has related in his five Exegetical books. He indeed wrote down the gospel correctly at John's dictation. But the heretic Marcion was thrust out by John, after being repudiated by him for his contrary sentiments. He had carried writings or letters to him from brethren who were in Pontus.'

The reference to Marcion is probably a confused reminiscence of an earlier statement that Papias had refused to countenance him. Apart from that, the prologue contains the important evidence that Papias in his Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord (c. AD 130/140) stated that John dictated the fourth Gospel. This is therefore our earliest external evidence for the Johannine authorship of the Gospel. The statement that it was Papias who wrote down the Gospel at John's dictation is unsupported and in any case improbable. Bishop Lightfoot made the very attractive suggestion that Papias wrote that the Gospel was 'delivered by John to the Churches, which they wrote down from his lips', but that he was wrongly taken to mean 'which I wrote down from his lips', since the Greek forms for 'I wrote' and 'they wrote', are identical in the imperfect tense (apegraphon) and very similar in the aorist (1st sing. apegrapsa; 3rd plur. apegrapsan, perhaps written apegrapsa). Other explanations have been proposed. In a letter to The Times of 13 February 1936, Dr. F. L. Cross wrote: 'My own reading of the prologue, if I may set it down dogmatically, is that in its original form it asserted that the fourth gospel was written by John the elder at the dictation of John the apostle when the latter had reached a very great age.'

For this John the elder we must turn to the fragment of Papias quoted on p. 29, where two Johns seem to be distinguished, one being spoken of in the past tense, the other in the present. Some scholars, indeed, have held that Papias refers to only one John; the more natural reading of the fragment, however, indicates a reference to two. Unfortunately, Papias is not the most lucid of writers, and his work survives only in fragments, so it is difficult to be sure of his meaning. It may well be that John the elder was a presbyter of Ephesus, and a disciple of John the apostle. There was a considerable migration of Palestinian Christians to the province of Asia in the third quarter of the first century; but John the apostle was the most distinguished of the migrants. (Philip and his daughters, who have been mentioned above, migrated at the same time.) But we need not metamorphose the obscure 'elder John' into such an unrecognized genius as he must have been if some theories of his activity are true. Some difficulties and inconsistencies in statements made by writers of the early Christian centuries may be due to a confusion of the two Johns; but it is highly unlikely that Irenaeus was guilty of such a confusion, and thought that his master Polycarp was speaking of the apostle when in fact he was speaking of the elder. If John the elder is to be distinguished from the apostle then one could easily envisage him as the copyist and editor of the fourth Gospel (though the evidence for this is rather slender), but probably not as the evangelist in person.

Some scholars have argued that our Gospel of John was translated from an Aramaic original. While this thesis has been presented with great ability, the case falls short of proof. The argument is strongest for the discourses of Jesus. Thus, reviewing C. F. Burney's Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel (1922), Professor G. R. Driver pointed out that Burney's most cogent examples occurred in the ipsissima verba of our Lord and other speakers.' But the Greek style of the Gospel as a whole could well be that of someone who had a good command of Greek but whose native language was Aramaic.

The evidence thus far, whether internal or external, might be thought to be in favour of the apostolicity of the Gospel. What, then, are the difficulties? Little weight can be attached to the objection that a simple fisherman would not be likely to compose a work of such profound thought. The author of the Pauline Epistles was a tentmaker, despite his rabbinical training, for it was considered fitting that a Rabbi should

earn his living by a worldly occupation. John, the son of Zebedee, had no rabbinical training, and therefore he and Peter were considered 'unlearned and ignorant men'-'uneducated laymen'-by the Sanhedrin (Acts iv. 13); but he had been a disciple of no ordinary Teacher, and as he was probably quite a young man at the time of the death of Christ he had plenty of time and capacity for mental and spiritual development. We remember how in England a tinker of Bedford showed no mean capacity for spiritual literature. (John Bunyan ed. note)

The problem of the fourth Gospel presents itself most acutely when we compare it with the Synoptics. For one thing, it seems to diverge from them in matters of geography, chronology, and diction.

The main geographical divergence is that while the Synoptists tell almost exclusively of a Galilaean ministry, John places most of our Lord's activity in Jerusalem and Judaea. This is not a serious difficulty; John knows of His Galilean ministry (cf. Jn. vii. 1), and the Synoptists implicitly confirm the Johannine account of a Jerusalem ministry. According to them, He is known by the owner of an ass in a village near Jerusalem (Mk. xi 3-6), He is expected for the Passover by the proprietor of a room in Jerusalem (Mk. xiv. 12-16), and in His lament over Jerusalem He says: 'How often would I have gathered your children together' (Mt. xxiii. 37; Lk. xiii. 34). John quite possibly knew the other Gospels, and for the most part does not overlap them, but rather supplements them.

The chronological differences are also easily disposed of. The Galilean ministry described by the Synoptists lasted for about a year; but John takes us farther back to a southern ministry of Christ before the imprisonment of John the Baptist. The year of Galilean ministry, recorded by the Synoptists, is to be fitted into the Johannine framework between John v and vii, ending with the Feast of Tabernacles of John vii. 2. The activity of Jesus in the south of Palestine before His Galilaean ministry throws light on some episodes in the Synoptia. We read the Synoptic story of the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John with fresh understanding when we learn from John i. 37 ff. that they had met the Master before in the company of John the Baptist.

These earlier chapters of John's Gospel, dealing with a Judaean phase of Jesus' ministry which was concurrent with the later ministry of the Baptist, have received fresh illumination from the new knowledge about the community of Qumran, northwest of the Dead Sea, which we owe to the discovery and study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the excavation of Khirbet Qumran. The dispute about purification mentioned in a baptismal setting in John iii. 25 is the sort of dispute which must have been very common in the Jordan valley and the Dead Sea region at a time when many competing 'baptist' groups inhabited those parts. The disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus were not the only people engaged in baptising there in those days. The members of the Qumran community had their own ceremonial washings, as had the members of other communities.

As for the events which John places after the Galilaean ministry, a careful comparison of his Gospel with the other three (and especially with Luke's) will show that the Synoptic narrative becomes more intelligible if we follow John in believing that the Galilean ministry ended in autumn of AD 29, that Jesus then went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, that He stayed there until the Feast of Dedication in December (Jn. x. 22), that He then spent some months in retirement in the Jordan valley (Jn. x. 40), returning to Jerusalem about a week before the Passover of AD 30 (Jn. xii. 1).

In fact, John's record, by its recurring mention of periodic festivals, provides a helpful chronological framework for the Synoptic narrative, which is lacking in chronological indications for the period between

Jesus' baptism and His last visit to Jerusalem. Mark does mention that there was much 'green grass' around when the five thousand were fed (vi. 39); this accords well with the statement of John vi. 4 that this took place shortly before the Passover (of 17 April, AD 29). Indeed, several scholars who decline to accept as historical John's portrait of Christ are quite willing to accept his chronological framework. There is some difficulty in reconciling his chronology of Passion Week with the Synoptic data, but this difficulty might disappear if we were better acquainted with the conditions under which the Passover was celebrated at that time. There is considerable ground for believing that certain religious groups (including our Lord and His disciples) followed a different calendar from that by which the chief priests regulated the temple services. While the chief priests and those who followed their reckoning ate the Passover on Friday evening, when Jesus was already dead (Jn. xviii. 28, xix. 14), He and His disciples appear to have eaten it earlier in the week.

As for differences in diction between this Gospel and the others, there is no doubt that the fourth evangelist has his own very distinctive style which colours not only his own meditations and comments but the sayings of Jesus and of John the Baptist. This phenomenon has sometime been described as his transposition of the gospel story into another key. We must remember, of course, that the sayings of Jesus and John, as this evangelist records them, are translations of an oral Aramaic original; and it is antecedently probable that a disciple who had penetrated so deeply into our Lord's mind should have been unconsciously influenced by His style, so that it coloured all that he wrote. Partly because of this, it is, at times, difficult to decide where the Master's words end and where the disciple's meditations begin.

The Synoptic Gospels themselves bear witness to the fact that Jesus sometimes spoke in the style which He regularly uses in John's Gospel. Part of the difference in style between His teaching in the Synoptic Gospels and in this Gospel may be due to the difference in environment. In the Synoptic Gospels He is conversing, for the most part, with the country people of Galilee; in the fourth Gospel he disputes with the religious leaders of Jerusalem or talks intimately to the inner circle of His disciples. We must not tie Him down to one style of speech. The same poetical patterns as appear in the Synoptic discourses recur in the Johannine discourses.' The Synoptists and John agree in ascribing to Him the characteristic asseveration Verily (literally, Amen), I tell you,' except that in John the 'Amen' is always repeated. And even in the Synoptists we come, now and again, on some thoroughly Johannine phraseology. In John our Lord frequently speaks of His Father as 'him who sent me'; the same phrase appears in Mark ix. 37: 'Whosoever receives me, receives not me, but him who sent me' (cf. Mt. x. 40; Lk. ix. 48), almost the same words as we find in John xii. 44, xiii. 20. Still more striking is the passage in Matthew xi. 27 and Luke x. 22: 'All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son and any to whom the Son is willing to reveal him'-an 'erratic block of Johannine rock', as it has been called.

It is worth mentioning here that striking affinities of thought and language have been recognised between this Gospel and the Qumran texts. These affinities must not be exaggerated; the Qumran literature comes nowhere near presenting us with such a figure as the Jesus of this Gospel. Yet the texts provide additional evidence for the basically Hebraic character of this Gospel. They appear especially in the phraseology which opposes light to darkness, truth to error, and so forth; and also in certain forms of messianic expectation which find expression both in the fourth Gospel and at Qumran.

We also meet quite remarkable similarities to the thought and language of the fourth Gospel in the Syriac collection of Christian hymns rather oddly entitled the Odes of Solomon, which belong to the end of the first or the early part of the second century.

But the most important question of all is that of the portrayal of Christ Himself. Does John present to us the same Christ as the Synoptists do? He is at one with them in viewing Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. If his purpose in writing the Gospel was that his readers might believe that Jesus was Messiah and Son of God, as he tells us (Jn. xx. 31), then we may recall that Mark introduces his record with very similar words: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God' (Mk. i. 1). There is, in fact, no material difference in Christology between John and the three Synoptists. He does indeed view Jesus as the preexistent Word of God, the Eternal Father's agent in creation, revelation and redemption; but he does not emphasise His deity at the expense of His humanity. Jesus grows tired on His journey through Samaria (Jn. iv. 6); He weeps at the grave of Lazarus (xi. 35); He thirsts upon the cross (xix. 28). Indeed, John is at pains to refute a current fancy that our Lord's humanity was only apparent and not real; that is why he insists so unambiguously that 'the Word became flesh' (Jn. i. 14) and affirms so solemnly, with the authority of an eyewitness, that there was nothing unreal about His death on the cross (xix.30-35).

We do, indeed, get a different impression of the self-disclosure of Jesus in this Gospel from that given by the Synoptists. In them the fact that Jesus is the Messiah is first realised by the disciples towards the end of the Galilaean ministry, at Caesarea Philippi, and Jesus gives them strict instructions to keep it to themselves; moreover, it is only then that He begins to speak about His forthcoming passion (Mk. viii. 27 ff.). In John His messianic dignity is recognized by others and acknowledged by Himself quite early in the record, while He speaks (in somewhat veiled language, to be sure) about the necessity for His death almost at the beginning of His ministry. The evangelist, of course, who had meditated for many years on the significance of the acts and words of Jesus, had learned to appreciate even the earliest stages of the ministry in the light of its consummation. Moreover, while Jesus might well refuse to blaze abroad His Messiahship in the revolutionary atmosphere of Galilee, there were sections of the population in Jerusalem who had to be confronted more directly with His claims, although even there it was a matter of complaint only three or four months before His death that He would not tell them plainly whether He was the Messiah or not (Jn. x. 24).

The last survivor of those who were most closely associated with Jesus during His ministry thought long and deeply about the meaning of all that he had seen and heard. Much that had once been obscure became clearer to his mind with the passage of time.

'What once were guessed as points, I now knew stars, And named them in the Gospel I have writ.'

In his old age he realised more than ever that, although the conditions of life in Palestine which had formed the setting for Jesus' ministry before AD 30 had passed away beyond recall, that ministry itself - indeed, the whole span of years that Jesus had spent on earth - was charged with eternal validity. In the life of Jesus all the truth of God which had ever been communicated to men was summed up and made perfect; in Him the eternal Word or self-expression of God had come home to the world in a real human life. But if this was so, the life and work of Jesus could have no merely local, national or temporary relevance. So, towards the end of the first century, he set himself to tell the gospel story in such a way that its abiding truth might be presented to men and women who were quite unfamiliar with the original setting of the saving events. The Hellenistic world of his old age required to be told the regenerating message in such a way that, whether Jews or Gentiles, they might be brought to faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, and thus receive eternal life through Him. Yet he would not yield to any temptation to restate Christianity in terms of contemporary thought in such a way as to rob it of its essential uniqueness. The gospel is eternally true, but it is the story of events which happened in history once for all; John does not divorce the story from its Palestinian context in order to bring out its universal application, and at the heart

of his record the original apostolic preaching is faithfully preserved.

Did he succeed in his aim? Whatever difficulties some scholars have felt, most readers of the Gospels in all ages have been unaware of any fundamental discrepancy between the Christ who speaks and acts in the fourth Gospel and Him who speaks and acts in the Synoptics. Many have testified that John leads them into an even deeper and more intimate appreciation of the mind of Christ than do the other three. The members of the Christian Industrial League, an organisation which carries on a gospel witness among the tough characters of Skidrow, in the heart of Chicago's 'Loop' area, say 'that in their work they have found that St. John's Gospel is the best for dealing with these tough, hard men. Its straight, unequivocal words about sin and salvation somehow go home and carry conviction to the most abandoned, while its direct invitation wins a response that nothing else does.' Or we may listen to a testimony from a very different source, the late Archbishop William Temple, theologian, philosopher and statesman:

'The Synoptists may give us something more like the perfect photograph; St. John gives us the more perfect portrait . . . the mind of Jesus Himself was what the Fourth Gospel disclosed, but . . . the disciples were

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