

**SOME OBJECTIONS TO THE HISTORICITY OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL
CONSIDERED**

CHAPTER XII

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THERE can be no question about the independence of the Fourth Evangelist. His account of the visits of Jesus to Jerusalem is certainly not derived from the Synoptists, and even in regard to his subject matter on ground common to the Synoptic narratives and himself, a careful study shows that he did not merely repeat what the Synoptists say. He tells the story his own way and tacitly corrects them. The most striking correction of all concerns the date of the crucifixion. Whereas the Synoptists make the Last Supper a Passover, and put

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the crucifixion on the 15th of Nisan, St. John says that the Supper was *before* the Feast of the Passover and he puts the crucifixion on the 14th of Nisan. Schmiedel allows that if the Fourth Evangelist is right in this, then his Gospel is to be regarded as correct all through, so crucial does this point seem to him to be. Schmiedel, however, thinks the Evangelist is wrong, and he refuses to regard this Gospel as history in any true sense of the word.

Professor Burkitt is also strongly opposed to the historicity of the Fourth Gospel, but it is a remarkable fact that he considers the writer of it correct in his dating of the crucifixion. Schmiedel's concession then that the Gospel is to be credited if the author is right on this point is one that cannot be assumed to be granted by opponents generally.

It would take up too much space if we were to attempt to answer in detail all the various objections which have been urged

against the Fourth Gospel as history. We may, however, single out some of the most important ones.

Professor Burkitt writes* : "The discrepancy between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptic narrative, *i.e.*, St. Mark's Gospel, comes to a head in the story of the Raising of Lazarus. It is not a question of the improbability or impossibility of the miracle, but of the time and place and the effect upon outsiders." There is no room, he tells us, for the miracle in the historical framework preserved by St. Mark. "Is it possible that any one who reads the continuous and detailed story of Mark from the Transfiguration to the Entry into Jerusalem can interpolate into it the tale of Lazarus and the notable sensation that we are assured that it produced? Must not the answer be, that Mark is silent about the Raising of Lazarus because he did not know of it? And if he did not know of it, can we believe

* *The Gospel History and its Transmission*, p. 221 ff.

that, as a matter of fact, it ever occurred? In all its dramatic setting it is, I am persuaded, impossible to regard the story of the Raising of Lazarus as a narrative of historical events."

In answer to this criticism it may be said, first, that 'discrepancy' is not an appropriate word to use. If of two writers of the history of a period one narrates and the other omits a particular event, it cannot properly be said that there is a discrepancy between them. Secondly, it may be questioned whether the story given by St. Mark of the time from the Transfiguration to the Entry into Jerusalem can fairly be described as 'continuous and detailed.' It certainly is not so if the Fourth Gospel be historical; and it is simply a prejudging of the whole matter so to describe it. Thirdly, I can see no reason for supposing that if the miracle of the Raising of Lazarus really took place, St. Mark must have known it.

In comparing the Fourth Gospel with the

Synoptists one must ever remember that account must in all fairness be taken of all three of them, and not only of St. Mark. While it is generally recognised now that the author of 'Matthew,' and St. Luke used St. Mark, or what is practically the same as our St. Mark, it is clear that they had other sources of information, one of these being that which is commonly denoted by Q. The use of St. Mark and Q alone will not fully account for St. Luke's Gospel, though of course it is very difficult to decide how much of it falls outside these two sources.

Now, if we had St. Mark's Gospel only and knew nothing of the others we might suppose that when Jesus left Galilee (St. Mark x. 1) it was to go almost direct to Jerusalem for the Passover. Of course, if the Fourth Gospel be historical, this was not the case. And I venture to say, that if St. Luke's Gospel have any historical value independently of its connection with St. Mark, there is room for the course of events as

St. John gives them. It is, I readily allow, extremely difficult to extract from St. Luke's Gospel a chronological sequence of events, but it seems to be clear that, according to this writer, after Jesus had "stedfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem," when "the days were being fulfilled that he should be received up," a good deal happened which from St. Mark's narrative we should never have imagined. I contend that it is not only the Fourth Gospel which requires us to regard the story from the Transfiguration to the Entry into Jerusalem in Mark as 'continuous and detailed.' St. Luke's story is inexplicable if we so regard it.

If we are to do justice to all the documents, we must not begin by assuming the completeness of St. Mark. My contention is that his Gospel is incomplete and needs to be supplemented from other sources. St. Mark does not say that when Jesus removed from Galilee and came into "the borders of Judæa [and] beyond Jordan," He did so merely

en route for the Passover Feast at Jerusalem. St. John's Gospel leaves plenty of room for a stay in these parts between verses 21 and 22 of chapter x., and again in x. 40 it is expressly said that after the Feast of the Dedication Jesus "went away again beyond Jordan into the place where John was at the first baptising; and there he abode." It was from this place that, according to our Evangelist, Jesus was sent for, when Lazarus of Bethany was sick.

If the story of Lazarus in the Fourth Gospel be not historical, then the Evangelist has made very skilful use of an incidental notice in St. Luke, where Martha and Mary are named and their dispositions contrasted (x. 38-42). It is worthy of note that, although St. Luke does not name the village where these sisters lived, the visit of Jesus to their home falls in that section of the Gospel which follows upon the time when He had stedfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem. The place which it occupies

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in the Gospel, immediately after Jesus had spoken the parable of the Good Samaritan, itself suggestive of the neighbourhood appropriate to it, shews that the village may well have been Bethany, which is the home of Martha and Mary according to the Fourth Evangelist.

Schmiedel exhibits some impatience with the Evangelist because he distinguishes the Mary of whom he is speaking as the one "which anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair." As the record of this anointing only comes later in the Gospel, Schmiedel considers it inappropriate to give this description before the incident of the anointing has been told. But this surely is hypercritical. The story of the anointing at Bethany was already known to those for whom our Evangelist wrote, and there seems to me to be nothing strange that when he mentions a woman bearing so common a name as Mary he should distinguish her as he does here.

Professor Burkitt recognises the wonderful dramatic setting of the story of the Raising of Lazarus. If the story be fiction, as we are asked to believe, this wonderful narrative must be set down to an extraordinary artistic power possessed by the writer. To this we must ascribe the contrast between the behaviour of the two sisters, which is so entirely in keeping with their dispositions as depicted in St. Luke. To this too must be due the graphic description of the despondency of Thomas: "Let us also go that we may die with him." We mark how entirely this agrees with the character of this Apostle as it is incidentally but consistently portrayed elsewhere in the same Gospel (St. John xiv. 5; xx. 24, 25). The fact that the portrayal is incidental, and by-the-way, has to be taken account of. It is easily explained if it is true to life, and a description of life; but not otherwise.

Dr. West-Watson, the Bishop of Barrow-

in-Furness, has recently suggested* that though the miracle of the Raising of Lazarus is not recorded by any of the Synoptists, the fact of the miracle may offer an explanation of the question put to our Lord by the Sadducees on the subject of Resurrection, and also of the eagerness of the authorities, according to Matthew, to make the tomb of Jesus secure by the sealing of the stone.

A rock of offence, second in formidableness only to the story of the Raising of Lazarus, is the anachronism of which the Evangelist is supposed to be guilty in placing the Eucharistic teaching given by Jesus a year too soon. In the third and ninth chapters we referred to Schmiedel's objection that the meaning of the Eucharistic Supper is given a year before its time. This fact, taken in conjunction with the statement of the Evangelist that five hundred, if not a

* *Journal of Theological Studies*, January, 1910.
Note on The Peræan Ministry.

thousand, Roman soldiers go backward and fall to the ground before Him, whom they were to arrest, at the words "I am he," and with the weight of the spices applied to embalm the body of Jesus, is sufficient, according to Schmiedel, to prove that the Gospel has no historical value.

We have seen, however, that Schmiedel would forego even these objections if the Fourth Evangelist be right, as we have good reason to think that he is, as to the date of the crucifixion. Perhaps then this objection to the Eucharistic teaching is not quite so formidable as some would have us think.

Professor Burkitt goes even beyond Schmiedel in his opposition. Schmiedel objects to the meaning of the Eucharistic supper being given a year before its institution, but Professor Burkitt says: "It is evident that 'John' has transferred the Eucharistic teaching to the earlier Galilean miracle." Now I contend that this last is unfair criticism. It is true in a sense, as

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Schmiedel says, that the meaning of the Eucharistic supper is given a year before it was instituted. I say that *in a sense* this is true. It would be more accurate to say that a year before the institution of the Eucharistic supper, teaching was given which, when the Supper was instituted, served to give it meaning. But no reference is made to the Supper in St. John vi., so that the Evangelist is not guilty of an anachronism.

But Professor Burkitt goes further, and in so doing transgresses the facts of the case, when he speaks of the Evangelist having transferred the Eucharistic teaching from the Last Supper to the earlier Galilean miracle. For where in the Synoptic story of the institution of the Lord's Supper do we find Eucharistic teaching? The Eucharist is then instituted, and the commandment is given to observe it, but there is no record of any teaching about it, except so far as the words, "This is my body" and "This

is my blood" can be described as teaching. I have contended in the ninth chapter that these words which our Lord then used imply some previous teaching, such as we find in St. John vi., for their explanation.

Professor Burkitt says that the Fourth Evangelist by omitting the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, "creates a false impression of the scene." He writes: * "The origin of the Christian rite of the common sacramental meal must have been known to every moderately instructed Christian, certainly to every one who would undertake to write an account of our Lord's life on earth, and we cannot suppose the Fourth Evangelist to have been ignorant of it. When, therefore, we find him writing an elaborate account of this last meal, including the announcement of the impending betrayal, in which, nevertheless, there is no mention of the epoch-making words of Institution, we can only regard his silence

* *The Gospel History and its Transmission*, p. 224.

as deliberate. He must have deliberately left out this exceedingly important incident; and thereby, so far as the mere narrative of facts is concerned, he creates a false impression of the scene."

It is difficult to see how the Evangelist creates a false impression, seeing that, as Professor Burkitt allows, the origin of the common sacramental meal was known to every moderately instructed Christian. The Evangelist does not say that the Eucharist was not instituted at the Last Supper. He is simply silent on the point, deliberately silent, as Professor Burkitt says; for why should he re-write what was already so well known? He tells us a great deal about the Last Supper which otherwise we should not know, and I can see no reason to doubt that what he records is fact and not fiction. I think there is some truth in the idea that the Fourth Evangelist made it his aim to supplement the other Gospels. Surely we should be thankful for the addi-

tional information, rather than feel annoyance because of the absence of repetition of what we already know. It is an abuse of words to say that the Evangelist, by omitting the account of the institution of the Eucharist and yet giving our Lord's sacramental teaching, preparatory to it, a year before, is guilty of a deliberate sacrifice of historical truth.

Again, Professor Burkitt accuses our Evangelist of giving a false impression respecting the Baptism of Jesus. "The descent of the Holy Spirit upon our Lord at His baptism by John is the commencement of the Ministry according to St. Mark. By this act, according to some early theologians, such as Aphraates, He received from the Baptist the sacerdotal gift. But the Fourth Evangelist will have none of it. The scene at the Jordan is indeed recorded by him, and John testifies to the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus; but the central incident, the actual baptism of Jesus by John, is

altogether left out. If the intention of the Evangelist had been to tell us what happened, if his intention had been to make us believe in Jesus because of what happened, such an omission would be nothing short of disingenuous."

This criticism seems to me strange indeed. The first statement is not correct, for St. Mark represents the ministry of Jesus as beginning after John was delivered up, so that it cannot accurately be said that, according to him, the baptism of Jesus is the commencement of the ministry. It is the Fourth Evangelist who makes the ministry begin at an earlier time. And it is quite misleading to say, as Professor Burkitt does, that the baptism of Jesus is altogether left out in the Fourth Gospel. It is not described in detail, it is true. But, as I have already pointed out in the second chapter, it is implicit in the narrative. For it seems quite clear from the Baptist's words in i. 33 that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at the time

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of His baptism: "*He that sent me to baptize with water, he said unto me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending and abiding upon him, the same is he that baptizeth with the Holy Spirit.*" "The central incident" is not the baptism, but the descent of the Spirit. This the Fourth Evangelist does not omit. His intention is to tell us what happened, whatever may be said to the contrary. He himself, as we have seen, came first to Jesus in consequence of the testimony of the Baptist to the descent of the Spirit which he had himself witnessed.

Objection is also taken to the miracles in the Fourth Gospel. Not but what there are miracles in the other Gospels, but the Fourth Evangelist is thought to carry the miraculous to excess. He certainly does not record a great number of miracles, but those that he does relate are considered to go beyond corresponding ones in the other Gospels. Thus Lazarus is raised from the dead after he has lain in the grave four days, whereas

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Jairus' daughter was raised shortly after death, and the widow's son at Nain before burial. The man at the pool of Bethesda had been thirty-eight years in his state of infirmity, and the blind man to whom Jesus gave sight had been blind from his birth. As regards these last two instances, we cannot say whether or not they go beyond miracles of healing given in the Synoptists. They tell of blind men to whom sight was restored, and blindness is blindness whether it dates from birth or not.

Schmiedel contends that the miracles in the Fourth Gospel are symbolic and nothing more. Symbolic they well may be, and indeed plainly are, but the question is whether they are fact or fiction. If they are fact, the exactness of statement which we find in this Gospel may be explained by the writer's personal knowledge and information. If they are fiction and symbolic, a meaning must be found for the details. We may ask, What is the symbolism of the

four days during which Lazarus had lain in the tomb? Schmiedel interprets the thirty-eight years of the malady of the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda in this way: For this length of time the Israelites had been obliged, as a punishment for their disobedience to God, to wander in the wilderness, without being permitted to set foot in the promised land. The sick man then represents the Jewish people, and in the five porticoes of the house in which he had so long hoped for a cure we may easily recognise the five books of Moses!

One would like to have an interpretation of the five-and-twenty or thirty furlongs that the disciples had rowed (St. John vi. 19) when they saw Jesus walking on the sea. Unfortunately here the number is not exact. But this gives some latitude for interpretation! It is much to be wished that Schmiedel would add this detail to the symbolic interpretation he gives of the miracle of the walking on the water. Of

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this he says* that it is certainly meant to serve to support the belief that at every celebration of the Lord's Supper, Jesus is really near to His people. The use of the word 'certainly' (*Sicherlich*) is certainly not justified. And such loose writing does not serve to commend Schmiedel's position in regard to the Fourth Gospel.

It must be allowed that some of the miracles that our Evangelist records are symbolic. They are speaking parables. This is plain from the words, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," in the story of the Raising of Lazarus, and from the Lord's declaration, "I am the bread of life," following upon the feeding of the five thousand. But this only raises the miracles to a higher level. It makes them signs in a high and spiritual sense. But they are no signs at all if they be mere fiction.

Another objection raised is the difference

* *Das vierte Evangelium*, p. 79.

between the manner of Jesus' teaching in the Fourth Gospel and that in the Synoptists. The latter abound in parables which are wholly absent in St. John. But it is absurd to suppose—and indeed the Synoptic writings themselves settle the point—that Jesus had only one method of teaching, viz., that by parables. That He employed this method widely is clear enough from the Synoptists, but there was no need for the Fourth Evangelist to repeat the parables which were already well known. Why should we doubt that Jesus made use of discourse as well as of parable?

But it is complained that the manner of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is unsympathetic and repellent. His way of addressing the Jews could not fail to turn them against Him. It must, however, be remembered that in this Gospel we are shown Jesus in the presence of those who opposed Him more than is the case in the other Gospels. And there are stern denunciations

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of Scribes and Pharisees even in the Synoptists. It is not possible to infer from the manner in which Jesus spoke to the simple folk in Galilee how He would address the religious authorities in Jerusalem. In the Synoptic narrative He is not represented as speaking smooth words to them. Perhaps there are some who think that Jesus ought to have made a compromise with the Jewish authorities instead of being so unbending. But the Fourth Gospel shows how impossible such a thing was. The claim of Jesus to come from God, whom He called His Father, was resented by the Jewish leaders from the first. Jesus had nothing to gain for Himself personally by pressing the claim. The opposition is determined from the beginning and He plainly foresaw the issue of it. A stern protest against mercenary and legalistic religious views had to be made, and strife was inevitable. The opposition of the Jews in the Fourth Gospel arises from the action

of Jesus in cleansing the temple when He said, "Make not my Father's house a house of merchandise," and from His supposed violation of the Sabbath, in justification of which He says: "My Father worketh hitherto and I work." This saying is thought to be provocative and possibly also to be ill-advised. But the question really is whether the claim of Jesus was true or not. One may be forgiven for suspecting that some of the opposition to the Fourth Gospel arises from a belief that it was not.

The question of the historicity of this Gospel is a crucial one. It is perfectly true that the Person of Christ as the Fourth Evangelist sets it forth does not go beyond what St. Paul in his Epistles represents it. But it would be a serious loss to us if we were deprived of the assurance we gain from the Fourth Gospel, if it be historical, that one who had lived in such close intimacy with Jesus in the days of His

flesh came to believe in Him as the author of this Gospel does. His prologue sounds the keynote of what his faith in regard to Jesus Christ was. The answer to the question of the historical value of what is recorded in the Gospel as fact is the answer also to the question whether that faith was justified.