

The Authority of our Lord in the Synoptic Gospels.¹

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THE personality of our Lord, and the effect of His personality on those who stood nearest to Him, gave rise to the greatest movement in history. If the Synoptic Gospels are wholly or in part the work of those who consorted with our Lord—if they are records of the preaching of those who knew Him in the flesh, some traces of this mighty personal factor must be discernible in them. The following article is the outcome of an attempt to study them from this point of view. It takes them as they stand—that is, as three historical documents of the origin of which history tells us that “St. Mark” is a report of the preaching of St. Peter, and that “St. Matthew” wrote the “Logia” in Hebrew; but whether or no the “Logia” and the “Gospel” are identical is uncertain. The writer of the Third Gospel says that he went over the whole ground again for the benefit of a friend.

Careful comparison of these documents shows that with their help we may approach the study of the personality of our Lord from three different points of view. Each of the three yields a somewhat different impression, because the personality of our Lord impressed different men in different ways. What kind of impression of authority and power did He make upon these three writers?

ST. MARK.

St. Mark's account, studied from Papias' point of view, as the report of St. Peter's preaching, seems to fall naturally into clearly marked divisions, each with its subject or *motif*.

After a short introduction (i. 1-13), in which the preparation of the people and the Lord's own preparation for His work are

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outlined, St. Peter used to relate how our Lord began His work with a clear, simple message : " The kingdom of God is near " —" God reigns." And this was accompanied by an exhibition of the reign of God—an exhibition of power or authority. (1) In preaching : " They were astonished at His teaching : for He taught them as having authority, and not as the Scribes." (2) In driving out evil spirits : " What is this ? A new teaching ! With authority He commandeth even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." (3) Over diseases, and this throughout Galilee. (4) Over sin : " That they might know that the Son of man had authority on earth to forgive sins." (5) Over the traditions and customs which, *e.g.*, in such matters as fasting and Sabbath observance, were crushing the spiritual power out of the religious life of the day.

This is the distinctive note of St. Peter's preaching. This complex, impressive exhibition of power and authority was our Lord's way of showing that in all departments of life God is King. The power was real and practical, and appealed with immense force to Simon the fisherman (i. 14—iii. 6).

In the next section our Lord is teaching the disciples how to lay hold of this power by faith. " He that hath ears to ear, let him hear." I am like a sower : the result of my teaching is often disappointing. Take pains to understand about the kingdom of God. It will grow as the seed grows to a great tree ; but the teacher's fate is like the sower's—half his words take no effect. " Take pains to hear."

Not long afterwards they were crossing the lake. The fury of the storm that night was terrifying, the danger pressing. When at a word from Him the danger passed, He asked why they were afraid. " Have ye not yet faith ?" Do you not yet understand that God reigns ? When a woman with an issue was cured, He said : " It was your faith." When Jairus hears that his little girl was dead, " Do not be afraid," He says, " only believe"; and as He restored the child, the parents and Peter and his two friends were amazed to see yet another province over which God was King.

He was displaying His power, and watching and fostering the disciples' slowly growing apprehension of His lesson (iii. 7-vi. 6).

He was not satisfied with a theoretical hold on the truth. And presently He equips the disciples with His own power, "giving them authority over the unclean spirits," and sends them out to preach and heal. After the excitement of that first mission He would have them rest. But by this time the crowds had become so insistent that He could not shake them off so long as He was in Galilee. That evening He fed 5,000 men with a few loaves and fishes. But the disciples failed to grasp the significance of the sign, they had not yet learned their lesson. When, about 3 a.m., He came walking over the lake to join them, they thought it was a ghost — "they had not understood about the loaves." He repeated the sign; and afterwards in the boat He was cautioning them, and, as they thought, hinting at their forgetfulness in letting their provisions run as low as one loaf. "Oh no," He said; "do you not perceive nor understand? Where are your eyes and ears? Five loaves enough for 5,000, seven for 4,000! Do you not yet understand?"

St. Peter at least was on the verge of the great discovery. This last exhibition of power, this last lesson on the reign of God, linking it with the message of creation itself, completed one part of the Lord's task (vi. 7-viii. 26).

And when, by the streams and glades of Cæsarea Philippi, He asked, "Who say ye that I am?" Peter was ready with his answer, "The Christ." At once the lesson is carried to its conclusion. "The Christ must suffer, die, and rise again." The reign of God extends beyond this life. This life is not everything. "Believe it, and you will discover life. Cling to this life, and you will never find life at all." All the rest of St. Peter's preaching is occupied with the reiteration of this final lesson: until the Lord, who had taught the great truth that God reigns, holding men spellbound by His teaching, mastering devils and disease, lifting the burden of sin, shouldering His way through

the customs and traditions of men, by the end of three years had made His power so strongly felt that He was put to death because it seemed likely to endanger that of the authorities. But death could not subdue him. There was no limit to His power.

Thus the authority of our Lord laid hold of St. Peter. In after years, when his eyes had long been opened to its full meaning, he described its effect in these striking words: "God *begat us again* to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter i. 3). It had changed the whole face of life.

ST. MATTHEW.

The account traditionally ascribed to St. Matthew has for its subject the Messiah. The formal proof ("thus it is written") that Jesus was Messiah runs like a thread through the narrative, and round it the story is woven.

In the introductory chapters (i.-iv. 16) our Lord is set before us as the descendant of David and Abraham. He was born in an atmosphere deeper and purer than that of the formal righteousness of the day.

Before His work began, the Baptist had confronted the people with a demand for the radical reformation of each individual. They were Abraham's children, but they must prove their descent by morality, goodness, character. When Jesus presented Himself for baptism, John hesitated; but Jesus persists: "Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." He has an ideal to fulfil, and He will carry it out in detail, as in the great principles which are to govern His work. They are described in the story of the Temptation. The Word of God is His food; trust in God His support; the method of God His method. A unique character is stepping out into the field. It was like the dawn after a dreary night. "Zebulon, Naphthali, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people that sat in darkness, saw a great light."

He begins to preach the Kingdom of Heaven (iv. 17-vii. 29). A brief account of the call of the Twelve, and the teaching,

preaching, and healing throughout the length and breadth of Galilee, precedes the discourse which has given this Gospel the premier place in the world's spiritual development. In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord sketches "the blessed in the Kingdom." It was no new teaching. The blessed in the Kingdom are the blessed in the Book. The jewels which Christ set in this character of brilliants had long lain under men's hands, but until now none had cut and set them. It is the character after God's own heart: these men are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. And as He proceeds with His picture of the Heavenly Father and His beloved children, men felt that they were lifted into the very atmosphere of Heaven.

The whole discourse may be described as an impressionist study of our Lord's earliest teaching. It is characteristic of the writer to disregard chronology in order to give his readers a vivid impression. (A careful comparison of almost any of the discourses in this Gospel with parallels in St. Luke will make this plain.) St. Mark draws strongly in black and white; St. Matthew gives us atmosphere, colour. St. Mark shows us the reign of God, a reign of power; St. Matthew, the atmosphere in which God reigns, the Kingdom of Heaven. Righteousness, character, are its keynotes.

The preaching of the Kingdom is followed by the translation of the lesson into deeds (viii. 1-ix. 34). It is characteristic of the writer to keep all this side of the ministry in lower relief. St. Mark gives it with a vividness which impresses every reader; St. Matthew sets it back. He wants the teaching to stand out in high relief against a background of deeds of mercy.

Another tour of teaching impresses our Lord with the unshepherded, uncared-for state of the people (ix. 35-x. 42). He calls the Twelve, and gives them a definite charge to these sheep of the house of Israel who had lost their way for want of shepherds. This discourse, too, is clearly a grouping of our Lord's teaching on the subject in hand. Two features stand out prominently—His feeling for the spiritual destitution of the

people, and His sense of the danger that awaited the disciples. It is a perfect impression of the atmosphere in which service in the Kingdom of Heaven must be fulfilled.

In chapter xii. opposition to Messiah's work is strongly developed. Clouds are gathering. The teaching of the period is summarized in the chapter of parables (xiii.). The Kingdom of Heaven is not all sunshine. Our Lord speaks of the mysteries, the lights and shadows, of the Kingdom. There is the mystery of failure (the sower), the mystery of evil (tares), the mystery of progress (leaven and mustard-seed), the mystery of fascination (treasure and pearl), and, again, the mystery of iniquity (drag-net). And the truth and beauty and sadness of that picture have haunted men ever since.

And so throughout the Gospel; the writer uses Mark's vigorous story of deeds in low relief to bring Messiah's teaching into prominence, and groups the teaching according to its subject-matter so as to bring home to his readers the new ideal of righteousness. The Old Book spoke of it. Messiah fulfilled it. His power as a religious teacher was that He made men feel the true ideal of Judaism. Teaching it positively as an atmosphere of lofty character and motive, the atmosphere of the Kingdom of God—a life whose dominant notes are righteousness and mercy—"Come unto Me," He said; "I will give you rest." I will show you how to be men of God. Religion is not a heavy burden. It has become such. It is easily carried. Teaching it negatively, as a protest against the dead formalism of the religion of the day, a protest which grew more and more emphatic, and culminated in the tremendous philippic of chapter xxiii.

Both aspects of the teaching appealed to the writer. The reality of the true ideal touched his conscience. The unanswerable attack on the false broke his bonds. This is the note of authority and power which laid hold on the author of the Gospel, whoever he was. And if, as tradition says, he was one who till Christ came was outcast, and then was welcomed, we can the more readily understand his eager response to that

welcome, and the gladness with which he travelled far to tell others of the power which had set him free and brought him peace.

ST. LUKE.

St. Luke's Gospel is an account of our Lord's life and work written for a God-fearing friend. The writer collected trustworthy information, tested his facts, arranged them in chronological sequence, going carefully over all the ground again so that his friend might have a reliable history of all that he had been taught about the Lord by word of mouth.

This makes our inquiry a little more difficult. The Gospels of St. Mark and St. Matthew are homiletic in method. They are the work of preachers accustomed by long practice to bring out the salient features of their message with lucidity and force. St. Luke's method is more strictly historical—he binds himself to chronology. Yet, for all this difference, the study of the third Gospel, with its careful touches in detail, its additions, its rearrangements here and there, reveals a conception of our Lord's personality which is distinct from that of the other two, and not less impressive. It must suffice to indicate this in one or two particulars only.

St. Luke stands back from his subject and draws in his picture on the broadest possible lines. Jesus is the Son of Adam, the Son of God (iii. 38). His growth from childhood to boyhood is an all-round development, physical, mental, spiritual.

His first visit to the Temple was memorable. He was fascinated by the teachers there. They had that to impart which He was already longing to receive. There was growing towards maturity in Him an understanding which, even at that age, astonished all. The boy was something more than a genius. He had a genuine passion for truth. He flings Himself with ardour into His Father's business, whether in the enchanted air of the divine learning of the Temple, or in the quiet round of obedience in the home life at Nazareth.

Here is a nature full of passion for what is highest and deepest, developing, in an ideal environment, the spiritual atmosphere of a pure home. "He grew in wisdom," St. Luke wrote, "and grew to be beloved by all" (ii. 52).

John the Baptist described Him before His ministry began as one Who would bring into the world a spirit of holiness and flame. There would be a distinctiveness about all that He said and did which would be a purifying and uplifting force among men.

Much of the Sermon on the Mount is to be found in the teaching on the level place (vi. 17); but with a difference. "Blessed are ye poor"—not "poor in spirit"; St. Matthew's "religious" point of view is different to this. The phrasing is crisp and bold. "Blessed ye poor, ye that hunger and weep and are hated. Woe to you rich and full and laughing ones whom men praise." What is this bold man saying? What does He mean? His words provoke thought, provoke certainly strong feeling. "The thoughts of many hearts are being revealed," as Simeon foretold.

And so throughout; the Lord's teaching in short memorable sayings and in longer discourses impressed St. Luke by its depth and wisdom. His deeds appealed to him as a doctor by their range of power and knowledge, and by their tenderness.

A single phrase, unique in the Gospels, exactly expresses the feeling which grew upon him as he studied all the facts of the Lord's life afresh. Thus saith the Wisdom of God (xi. 49).

He shows us in the course of his narrative how our Lord's early enthusiasm for the Temple and the religious life of the day received its first great shock at Nazareth, gradually cooled, then turned to strong antagonism. "They had taken away," he said, "the key of knowledge; they entered not in themselves, and those that were entering they hindered" (xi. 52).

We must not go further into detail. Nothing but careful study of the Gospel will reveal the strength of the impression

that the wisdom of the Master—its breadth, its calm, its power—made upon St. Luke. It was no frigid intellectualism. It was a passion revealing itself in deed and word. "I came to cast fire upon the earth, and what will I if it be already kindled? I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straightened till it be accomplished!" (xii. 49). A spirit ardent and sensitive. A spirit also which can inspire others. At the very end of his story St. Luke relates an incident which is significant (xxiv. 13-35). Two friends of the Lord's were on their way home from Jerusalem after His death, in utter desolation, when He met them. They did not recognize Him, but as He opened the real meaning of the Scriptures to them "their hearts burned within them." Here, again, the Master's hold upon the writer may be seen. His words and deeds were a revelation of the Wisdom of God; and as careful study brought this home with ever-growing conviction to the writer, his heart burned within him, and he felt and bowed before the Power the authority of Him whose life's story he wrote that his friend might be sure that what he had been taught about Him was indeed the truth.

CONCLUSION.

No account of the way in which the power and authority of our Lord impressed the Evangelists would be complete if it stopped here. He impressed Himself by His practical power on St. Peter, by His ideal of righteousness upon the writer we call St. Matthew, by the cumulative force of His whole life and work upon St. Luke. The three narratives with their strongly-marked differences converge as they reach the closing scenes. Each by a different path leads us first to Gethsemane to witness a strong Man's agony, to Calvary to see His triumph, to the Sepulchre to hear Him proclaimed the Son of God with power.

If the impression of power made by the personality of our Lord during His ministry was striking, His death and triumph over death made it indelible.

When a friend is removed by death, blemishes are forgotten :

he seems dearer than ever before. When a great human figure vanishes from the scene, he seems immeasurably greater than in life. Death enhances men's regard for those they love and reverence. We have seen something of the strength and depth of the love and reverence which bound the disciples to the Lord while He was upon earth; death intensified both. Again, there come to us all moments in our lives when the question confronts us, "Is all that I believe, all that I cling to, this faith in God, in Christ, upon which I have staked my life, true or false?" We seem to stand on the brink of an abyss which appals us. The Lord's disciples faced that compared with which such gloomy moments are but the memory of a fantastic dream. They saw their Master quail. They fled in terror from a power He could not resist. They saw Him done to death. Not a hideous possibility, but despair blacker than any we need ever know overwhelmed them. We can but faintly gauge the revulsion when the full truth about His power swept over them. Recall one of its effects. All thoughts of revenge for their Master's sufferings and death were swept away. It was as if they had never been. Those of them whose writings we have been studying struggle to find words to express the sense of His power and authority which now possesses them. "In none other," says St. Peter, "is security absolute and unbounded to be found, in none other in Heaven or on earth" (Acts iv. 12). "All authority in Heaven and earth are His," are the closing words of St. Matthew's Gospel. "All that I told you was but the beginning" (Acts i. 1), says St. Luke, writing again to his friend. And at the moment that he wrote Imperial Rome herself, the mistress of the world, had felt the touch of Him before whose power she was to bow.

Before the volume whose opening chapters we have been studying closes, it seemed to one who had ears to hear that already in the stillness voices could be heard singing in the Presence chamber of the King, "Unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, be the blessing, and the honour, and the glory, *and the dominion* for ever and ever" (Rev. v. 13).