

*RECENT NEW TESTAMENT CRITICISM.*

II.

THE EVANGELIC DEPOSIT AND THE APOSTOLIC WITNESS.

THERE occur on the pages of the New Testament two words which are pregnant with significance as regards the momentous question of the historicity of the evangelic records. One is *παραθήκη* and the other *μαρτυρία*: and, if we would see them in their historical setting and appreciate their bearing upon the present problem, we must recall the methods of the Jewish Rabbis at whose feet the New Testament writers had sat and by whose principles their minds were dominated.

It is not unnatural that the hypothesis of the oral transmission of the evangelic tradition should excite in modern minds a sense of wonderment not far removed from incredulity. Is it possible that it should have been preserved in the memories of the disciples for at least a generation ere being committed to writing? And if such were indeed the manner of transmission, what can be the value of the record? One of the marvels of modern literature is Boswell's report, so minute and accurate withal, of his hero's conversation; and the only explanation is that, as he states in his introductory chapter, he "had the honour and happiness of enjoying his friendship for upwards of twenty years; had the scheme of writing his life constantly in view; acquired a faculty in recollecting, and was very assiduous in recording, his conversation, of which the extraordinary vigour and vivacity constituted one of the first features of his character." How quickly and irrecoverably even that vigorous and vivacious conversation must have faded from the listener's memory had he not hastened to write it down while it was still ringing in his ears! It was by a like device that Damis of Nineveh, the Boswell

of Apollonius of Tyana, succeeded in preserving his master's conversation and rescuing even his *obiter dicta* (εἰ τι καὶ παρεφθέγγατο) from oblivion.<sup>1</sup>

Now is it conceivable that the discourses of our Lord should have remained fresh and accurate in the memories of His disciples for a generation and suffered no corruption in their transit from mouth to mouth? Inconceivable as it may appear to us, it was no impossible achievement for men trained in the Rabbinical schools. The marvel of the oral transmission of the evangelic tradition sinks into utter insignificance beside the fact that it was not until the close of the second century of our era that the Rabbinical literature was reduced to writing. It was at least a century before the birth of our Lord that the *Halacha* and *Haggada* came into existence, and during those three centuries that voluminous and ever-increasing literature was carried in the memories of the Rabbis and their disciples and orally transmitted from generation to generation.

"Commit nothing to writing" was the constant maxim of the Rabbis,<sup>2</sup> prompted originally no doubt by their reverence for the Written Law (תּוֹרָה שֶׁבִּכְתָּב), though latterly they invested the Oral Law (תּוֹרָה שֶׁבֶּעַל פֶּה) with transcendent dignity and claimed for it an equal antiquity and divinity with the Pentateuch, alleging that it had been given to Moses at Sinai, had come to Ezra through the Prophets, and had been transmitted orally ever since.<sup>3</sup> The maxim however was still adhered to even when a superior sanctity was no longer attached to the Written Law; and the diligence of the Rabbis was directed to the immaculate transmission of the Oral Law, ἡ παράδοσις τῶν πρεσβυτέρων (Matt. xv. 2). "Train many disciples" was their motto; and their disciples—תַּלְמִידֵי הַחֲכָמִים as they were called—were drilled in the multitudinous precepts of

<sup>1</sup> Philostr. *Apoll.* i. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Jost, *Gesch. des Jud.* i. 367.

<sup>3</sup> Robertson Smith, *O. T. in Jew. Ch.* p. 60.

that interminable tradition until they had them by heart. The lesson was repeated over and over again till it was engraved upon their memories; and hence the phrase for Rabbinical instruction was  $\text{הַשְׁבָּרָה}$  (*repetition*), rendered *δευτέρωσις* by the Greek Fathers.<sup>1</sup> Nor was it only while they sat at the Rabbi's feet that the disciples conned their lesson. It must never be out of their minds. "When two sit together," said R. Chananiah ben Teradion,<sup>2</sup> "and do not converse about the Law, they are an assembly of scorners, of which it is said, *Sit not in the seat of scorners*. But when two sit together and converse about the Law, the Shekinah is in their midst." "Whoso," said R. Simon,<sup>3</sup> "walks by the way and repeats the Law to himself, but interrupts his repetition and says, *How beautiful is this tree! How beautiful is this field!* the Scripture reckons him as one that has forfeited his life."

It is truly wonderful what a genius for remembrance was fostered by this method. A good disciple was likened to "a well lined with lime which loses not one drop";<sup>4</sup> nor was this an ideal proficiency never attained. Such was the precocity of the historian Josephus that at the age of fourteen he was consulted by the High Priest and the rulers about *minutiæ* of the Law.<sup>5</sup> "Should one question any of us about the laws," he says,<sup>6</sup> "he would repeat them all more easily than his own name. Indeed from the very dawn of understanding<sup>7</sup> we learn them off and have them as it were engraved on our souls."

The study of the law was thus a purely mechanical exercise, and the least disposition to originality would have been fatal to proficiency. The qualifications for success were a retentive memory and a scrupulous adherence to the

<sup>1</sup> Jerome, *Ep. ad Algas.*; cf. Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Aboth*, iii. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Aboth*, iii. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Aboth*, ii. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Vita*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Contra Apionem*, ii. 18.

<sup>7</sup> ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης εὐθὺς αἰσθήσεως. Cf. Timothy instructed ἀπὸ βρέφους in ἱερὰ γράμματα (2 Tim. iv. 15).

letter of the tradition. A curse was pronounced against the disciple who should let anything slip,<sup>1</sup> and the tradition was to be handed on exactly as it had been received, *ipsisima verba*, בְּלִשׁוֹן רַבּוֹ.<sup>2</sup> It was the boast of R. Eliezer that he had never taught anything which he had not learned from his teacher. "It came to pass," says the Evangelist at the close of the Sermon on the Mount, "when Jesus ended these words, the multitude were astonished at His teaching: for He was teaching them as one that had authority, and not as their scribes." No wonder they were impressed by His reiterated ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, accustomed as they were to the faltering preface "*R. So-and-so saith.*"

Such was the school in which the disciples of Jesus had been trained. With the doubtful exception of St. Luke the New Testament writers were all Jews, and it was at once natural and inevitable that they should handle the παράδοσις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ precisely as they had handled the παράδοσις τῶν πρεσβυτέρων. Hence those two words which are now to engage our attention, and which have the force of technical terms in the New Testament. The teaching of Jesus was the παράδοσις of the Apostles; but they did not so entitle it, remembering doubtless His denunciation of that vain παράδοσις for the sake of which the Pharisees and Scribes transgressed the commandment of God (Matt. xv. 3, 6). They gave it a new name, a very beautiful and significant one. Τὴν καλὴν παραθήκην they called it (2 Tim. i. 14)—"The Fair Deposit." The meaning of the term is well illustrated by that striking story in Herodotus<sup>3</sup> of the Spartan Glaukos, son of Epikudes, to whose keeping a certain Milesian committed half his wealth (θέσθαι παρὰ σέ), and who refused to deliver up the deposit (παραθήκην) when it was reclaimed. Hence the metaphor of the Apostle when he says (2 Cor. v. 19), "God hath

<sup>1</sup> *Aboth*, iii. 8.<sup>2</sup> *Edujoth*, i. 3.<sup>3</sup> vi. 86.

committed unto us (*θεμένος ἐν ἡμῖν*) the Word of Reconciliation." The Gospel was the Fair Deposit, and it was the sacred duty of those to whose keeping it had been committed to guard (*φυλάσσειν*) it with the selfsame faithfulness wherewith the Rabbis guarded the *παράδοσις τῶν πρεσβυτέρων*. It was a twofold vigilance they must exercise. They must see to it on the one hand that nothing was lost, and on the other that it suffered no change; and thus with an awful sense of responsibility must they hand on that precious deposit unimpaired and uncorrupted. *Τὴν καλὴν παραθήκην φύλαξον διὰ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου τοῦ ἐνοικοῦντος ἐν ἡμῖν.*

The Gospel was a sacred deposit, and the business of its guardians was not to embellish or even interpret it, but simply to preserve it. In a word, their calling was *μαρτυρία*. How elaborately this function of the Apostles is defined in the New Testament, and how clear was their perception of it! "When the Comforter is come, Whom I will send to you from the Father," said Jesus in the Upper Room (John xv. 26-27), "even the Spirit of Truth which proceedeth from the Father, He shall witness (*μαρτυρήσει*) concerning Me; and do ye also witness (*μαρτυρεῖτε*) because from the beginning ye are with Me." And on the Mount of Ascension He repeated the charge: "Ye shall be witnesses of Me (*ἔσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες*) in Jerusalem and Judæa and Samaria and unto the end of the earth" (Acts i. 8). Nor did they forget. "This Jesus," said St. Peter on the Day of Pentecost, "did God raise up, whereof all we are witnesses" (Acts ii. 32; cf. i. 22, iii. 15, v. 32, x. 39). It was the selfsame commission that was given to Saul of Tarsus (xxii. 15; xxvi. 16); and he remembered it (xiii. 31-32). So impressed was St. Paul by this view of his vocation that he calls the Gospel message *τὸ μαρτύριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ* (1 Cor. i. 6; cf. 2 Tim. i. 8; 2 Thess. i. 10). In view of all that the Fourth Gospel, that sublime creation of sanctified

mysticism, has suffered at the hands of the critics, one may be pardoned for catching a tone of pathos in the asseveration so simple and unfaltering with which it closes: "This is the disciple that witnesseth (ὁ μαρτυρῶν) concerning these things and that wrote these things; and we know that his witness (μαρτυρία) is true" (xxi. 24). Surely a consensus so remarkable yet so plainly undesigned has an apologetic value. How comes it to pass that all the sacred writers are possessed with this conception of the apostolic vocation unless it emanated from Jesus?

In this connection 1 Tim. vi. 20-21 is fraught with significance. "Oh Timothy, guard the Deposit, turning away from profane babblings and oppositions of the Knowledge falsely named, which certain professing missed the mark as regards the Faith." The point of this pleading injunction obviously is that heretical teachers had been busy at Ephesus, certain persons (τινες) well known, whom the Apostle might have named and whom Timothy would immediately identify. The epistle is full of them (i. 6-7; iv. 1-3, 7; vi. 3-5). They were heretics of the blatant sort, loud-mouthed and shallow-minded, puffed up with windy vanity (τετύφωται, vi. 4). Ἐπαγγελλόμενοι means "professing," but it carries a suggestion of *boastfulness*, as Euthymius Zigabenus perceived when he explained it by αὐχοῦντες. It would seem that this unhealthy teaching was of two kinds. Some tickled the fancies of their hearers with silly and unhistorical legends about Jesus, which the Apostle justly brands here as βεβήλους κενοφωνίας, and in iv. 7 as βεβήλους καὶ γραώδεις μύθους—the style of fables which are found in the apocryphal gospels and which could serve only to bring Christianity into contempt. Others again were of a philosophical turn, and they unsettled the minds of the believers by their metaphysical disputations (cf. Col. ii. 8)—ἀντιθέσεις τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως. Baur, bent on bringing the epistle down to the latter half of the

second century, sees here a reference to Marcion's book *The Antitheses* written about the middle of the second century to expose alleged contradictions not only between the Old Testament and the New but between those portions of the latter which he accepted and those which he rejected. This is a baseless assumption. *Ἀντίθεσις* was no coinage of Marcion, but a good Greek word at least as old as Plato, part of the traditional stock-in-trade of philosophers, rhetoricians, and grammarians; and if Marcion could use it in 150, why should not St. Paul in 67? It means here simply *oppositions*, and is most appropriate to the Apostle's argument. *Apte dixit ἀντιθέσεις, oppositiones* is the just and cutting comment of Erasmus: *quod omnibus de rebus inter istos mira sit digladiatio.*

St. Paul does not essay the refutation of those wrangling heretics: why should he when they were busy refuting one another? Nor does he urge Timothy to join issue with them: on the contrary he bids him stand aloof (*ἐκτρέπεσθαι*) from the bootless and interminable *λογομαχία* (vi. 4). His business is to keep jealous watch over the evangelic tradition and see that amid all this babble and disputation it suffers no corruption and no mutilation. "Oh Timothy," pleads the Apostle, "guard the Deposit." *Non enim, says Erasmus, vult aliquid addi traditis.*<sup>1</sup>

So far as documentary evidence goes, the authenticity of this passage is indubitable; yet Moffatt brackets it as spurious and disposes of it by the loud-sounding *dictum*: "In these verses it is impossible to miss the tone of semi-legalism, ecclesiastical formality, and anxiety, which begins to be heard in the sub-apostolic literature. To suppose that such utterances were due to Paul before 67 A.D., is not merely to violently contradict the apostle's self-revela-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Herm. Past., Mand. iii. § 2: οἱ οὖν ψευδόμενοι ἀθετοῦσι τὸν κύριον καὶ γίνονται ἀποστερηταὶ τοῦ κυρίου, μὴ παραδίδοντες αὐτῷ τὴν παρακαταθήκην ἣν ἔλαβον.

tion in his other epistles, but also to throw the whole development of early Christian ideas and institutions into gratuitous and inextricable confusion.”<sup>1</sup> Now, if it be a true interpretation that our investigation has led us to, this awe-inspiring verdict is no better than a grave misjudgment and exemplifies at once the peril of *a priori* prepossession and the supreme value of sound exegesis, that prime essential to just and reasonable criticism. How luminously significant and how suitable to the lips of St. Paul does the passage appear when placed in its true historical setting! It reveals to us a necessity which had emerged at that stage of the history of the primitive Church, and which must have cost the Apostles much anxious thought—the necessity of effectively safeguarding the evangelic tradition by committing it to writing and stereotyping it in a permanent record. *Littera scripta manet*. It would be as the result of this anxious solicitude for the purity and integrity of the Fair Deposit that our canonical Gospels were put into shape and an authoritative version of the evangelic history given to the Church.

Now, if such be indeed the manner in which the primitive tradition was preserved and transmitted, it furnishes a singularly reassuring guarantee of the absolute credibility of the evangelic narratives. Indeed it may be safely asserted that there is no other history possessed of such credentials or entitled to equal reliance; and it is surely a circumstance to be marvelled at that, when the Gospel came into the world, it fell into the hands, not of thinkers who would have turned it into a philosophy, or of historians who would have sifted and arranged it according to the canons of their time, but of men trained in that Jewish school to idolatrous veneration of tradition and scrupulous solicitude for its immaculate transmission. One may well think kindly of Rabbinical pedantry, considering the heavy

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. N. T.* p. 561.



debt under which, in the wondrous providence of God, it has laid the world.

It is no mere surmise that the *dicta* and *facta* of Jesus (τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἢ λεχθέντα ἢ πραχθέντα) were thus preserved and transmitted. On the contrary, it is an indisputable fact attested by clear and abundant evidence. Ere the appearance of the written Gospel there was a class of teachers in the primitive Church whose function it was to go about instructing the believers in the oral tradition and drilling it into their minds after the fashion which prevailed in the Rabbinical schools.<sup>1</sup> They were named οἱ κατηχοῦντες and their scholars οἱ κατηχούμενοι (Gal. vi. 6) — a most expressive name, since *κατηχεῖν* signifies to *din* a thing into a person's ears by incessant reiteration. Their *ἡγήσις* or *δευτέρωσις* was called *διδασκαλία*, and it was hard and disagreeable work with nothing of the inspiration of preaching about it. *Οἱ κοπιῶντες ἐν λόγῳ καὶ διδασκαλίᾳ* is St. Paul's description of it. However laborious and mechanical it may have been, it was nevertheless a necessary service at that period, when there was no written record and believers were dependent on oral instruction for their knowledge of the historic facts of the Gospel; and St. Paul more than once took occasion to remind the Church of the debt it owed to the Catechizers (Gal. vi. 6; 1 Tim. v. 17–18).

The presence of this order of the Catechizers demonstrates the existence in the primitive Church of an oral tradition; nor is there lacking evidence of the value which was set upon it and the fidelity wherewith it was transmitted. We have seen what alarm was excited in the heart of St. Paul lest that Fair Deposit should be corrupted by "profane and old wifish fables" or mutilated by metaphysical speculations. In view of the leading part which he is supposed by the critics to have played in

<sup>1</sup> Wright, *Composition of the Four Gospels*, chaps. i.–iii.

obscuring the historic Jesus by a haze of devotion, it is interesting to note the emphasis wherewith the Apostle asseverates his scrupulous adherence to the Evangelic tradition: "I received (*παρέλαβον*) from the Lord that which I also handed on (*παρέδωκα*) to you" (1 Cor. xi. 23); "I handed on (*παρέδωκα*) to you first of all that which I also received (*παρέλαβον*), that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He hath been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen" (xv. 3-8). And, besides such declarations, there are other indications in the New Testament, all the more conclusive that they are undesigned, of profound reverence for the evangelic tradition and earnest solicitude for its purity and integrity. One is *the almost total silence of the Evangelists regarding the earlier life of Jesus*. In order to appreciate the significance of this fact it is necessary to mark the contrast presented by the apocryphal gospels. Next to nothing is related by our Evangelists of the early life of Jesus. St. Matthew and St. Luke tell the story of His wondrous Birth; St. Luke records the visit of the Holy Child to Jerusalem in the company of Joseph and Mary; and St. Mark drops a casual hint (vi. 3) that He followed the trade of carpenter at Nazareth. Such are the sole glimpses of Jesus in the canonical Gospels betwixt His Birth and the commencement of His public Ministry. It is most natural that believers should desire some knowledge of those thirty silent years, and the apocryphal gospels essay to satisfy this curiosity. Some of their stories may possibly be authentic, but they are mostly silly fables. St. Luke tells how "the Child grew and waxed strong, being filled with wisdom, and God's grace was upon Him" (ii. 40); and St. John pointedly asserts that the miracle at Cana was "the beginning of His signs" (ii. 11); but the apocryphal gospels cram the most amazing prodigies into their story

of His childhood. They tell, for instance, how He and His playmates made clay sparrows by the riverside, and how, when He clapped His hands, His sparrows took wing and flew chirping away; and again, how He had a dispute with His teacher, R. ben Israel, about the letter Aleph, and, when the latter raised his rod to chastise Him, his arm was paralysed. It would be such legends as these that St. Paul had in view when he warned Timothy against "profane babblings."

How comes it that our Evangelists are so resolutely silent regarding the earlier years of the Lord's earthly life? The obvious explanation is that the oral tradition took to do exclusively with His public Ministry; and, while they had doubtless heard of much besides that was interesting and perhaps authentic, they realized that their business was simply to reproduce that tradition without increment or corruption. They were not independent authors setting to work with a free hand and full liberty to search out fresh material and incorporate it in their narratives, but editors rather whose duty it was to eschew originality and faithfully reproduce what they had received. And their silence regarding the alluring theme of the Lord's early life is an evidence of their scrupulous fidelity. They have guarded the Fair Deposit and handed it on unsullied. "What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands did feel, concerning the Word of Life—and the Life was manifested, and we have seen and witness and proclaim to you the Life, the Eternal Life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard, we proclaim to you also, that ye also may have communion with us" (1 John 1-3).

A further indication of the fidelity wherewith the Synop-  
tists have reproduced the evangelic tradition is the tone,  
more easily felt than defined, which pervades their nar-  
ratives—a tone of aloofness as of men contemplating a

*transcendent mystery which they could only marvel at and durst not construe.* It is this attitude that differentiates the Synoptics especially from the Fourth Gospel and the Pauline Epistles. "To me it seems certain," says the late Mr. R. H. Hutton, in his masterly discussion of *The Incarnation and Principles of Evidence*,<sup>1</sup> "that St. Paul and St. John alone among the apostles whose writings are recorded, had gained anything like a conscious grasp of this truth. The authors of the first three gospels, though they mention facts which point to it, as the rays from behind a cloud point to the hidden position of the sun, had apparently never grasped the magnitude of the truth that they were helping to reveal." They rarely interpret and never theologize. They simply set forth the wondrous story, and it is left for others to interpret it and unfold its theological and metaphysical implications.

Eusebius<sup>2</sup> quotes from the *Outlines* of Clement of Alexandria a tradition that St. John, perceiving that "the bodily things" had been set forth by the other three Evangelists, at the instigation of his acquaintances, and by inspiration of the Spirit, composed "a spiritual Gospel." There is not a little justice in this distinction of the Synoptics as *somatic* and the Fourth Gospel as *pneumatic*, yet it would be unwise to depreciate the former on this account. It is unquestionable that St. John had attained to a profounder insight than the others into the mystery of the Incarnation and wondrously disclosed the hidden majesty of our Blessed Redeemer; nevertheless, just because it is an interpretation of Jesus, his Gospel is in a sense less valuable than the others. It shows us our Lord *as St. John understood Him*; yet even the Beloved Apostle could know but in part and prophesy

<sup>1</sup> *Theol. Essays*, viii. p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> H.E. iv. 14: τὸν μέντοι Ἰωάννην ἔσχατον συνιδόντα ὅτι τὰ σωματικὰ ἐν τοῖς εὐαγγελίοις δεδήλωται, προτραπέντα ὑπὸ τῶν γνωρίμων πνεύματι θεοφορηθέντα πνευματικὸν ποιῆσαι εὐαγγέλιον.

but in part; and, glorious as his conception of it may have been, the fact was more glorious still. St. John perceived one aspect of "the manifold wisdom of God" revealed in all its fulness in Jesus, and St. Paul perceived another aspect—each different, both true, neither complete. It is the unique distinction and the priceless blessing of the Synoptic Gospels that they do not essay an interpretation, but set forth the Lord for all time as He "tabernacled among men, full of grace and truth."

Speaking of the evangelic tradition, "the fairest memorial which the primitive Christian community has raised for itself," Weizsäcker says: <sup>1</sup> "Its history shows it unproductive in doctrine. It has left no developed theology like that of Paul. It spread the Gospel only within a very limited territory. Compared with Paul's great conceptions and bold undertakings, it appears to represent stagnation and to prepare for him hindrances. Its merit comes to light only when one realizes the fidelity and persistency with which it clings to its Master and His doctrine." This last sentence goes to the very root of the matter. The Fair Deposit had been committed to the Evangelists, and they realized their awful responsibility and the obligation under which they lay to guard (*φυλάσσειν*) it and transmit (*παράδιδοναι*) it unimpaired. Their task was not *ἐπίδοσις* but *παράδοσις*. Their vocation was *μαρτυρία*. Most solemnly did they realize their responsibility and most faithfully did they discharge it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Das Apostol. Zeit.* S. 382.