

The Four Gospels in the
Earliest Church History

The Baird Lecture for 1907

The Four Gospels in the Earliest Church History

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In Memoriam

THE VERY REV. A. H. CHARTERIS,

D.D. (EDIN. AND ABERD.), LL.D.

PREFACE.

HOWEVER the ground may change in the conflict as to the credibility of the Gospel history, the first line of defence, it seems to me, must always be the external evidence. It is the external evidence for the Four Gospels which I have endeavoured in these Lectures to state in the light of the most recent research. The statement does not profess to be minutely exhaustive, but it is hoped that nothing material has been overlooked.

To the Baird Trustees I owe cordial acknowledgments for giving me the opportunity of dealing with this important subject for the first time in their Lectureship.

It has been a high gratification to me that my old teacher, Professor Charteris, has read the Lectures in proof, and done so with the ardour and keenness of former years. From my ever-helpful colleague, Professor Cowan, I have received similar aid and many valuable suggestions.

My debt to the chief authorities in this field,

as the reader will at once perceive, is great. A selected list of books, most of which have been consulted, is given after the table of contents. Of these, Eusebius's 'Ecclesiastical History' deserves special mention, M'Giffert's translation, with its valuable notes, having been in constant use. Next to it, the monumental works of Professor Zahn have been of service. His 'Einleitung in das N.T.' (in its third edition) has now been translated, and will be published in the course of this year. The references in the Lectures are to the translation, of which the publishers, Messrs T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, kindly allowed me to see the sheets in advance. To our great English scholars I am under deep obligations; and with the works of Westcott and Lightfoot, Sanday and Stanton, I venture to name Professor Charteris's 'Canonicity,' which, though out of print, is by no means out of date.

P.S.—This volume had been passed for press with a dedication to the Very Reverend A. H. Charteris, D.D., LL.D., "as a tribute of admiration and affection from an old student." His sudden death on April 24 has made an alteration necessary. It is now with the deepest gratitude dedicated to his memory.

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN,

May 2, 1908.

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The Four Gospels in the Earliest Church History.



INTRODUCTORY.

IN any estimate we form of the trustworthiness of the Gospels as a presentation of the Life, the Teaching, and the Work of Christ, much depends upon the directness of their sources and their proximity in time to the events which they record. When He is represented as the completion of God's earlier revelation of Himself to man, it is a momentous consideration whether He is a mere mythological figure or a great historical Personality. When the impression of Him conveyed by the writers of the Gospels is that of a Divine Person of supernatural power, stainless purity, and unwearying goodness, it is of supreme importance for us to have the assur-

ance that the picture has been drawn from the life. When there are words attributed to Him expressing the consciousness of unique Sonship to God the Father, a Sonship which was "perfect in every relation and of cosmical and eternal significance," it is of profound concern to us to have a record of them reliable and sure. As regards that death which He died upon the Cross, of which He said that it was a ransom for many, and of which His commissioned Apostles declared that it was for the remission of the sins of the world, it is of the utmost consequence to know that the evangelic and apostolic testimony is in accordance with the facts. And when the same narratives, with variations in detail but with substantial unanimity, record the Resurrection, setting before us the two momentous facts of an empty sepulchre and a Risen Lord, it is essential for the fulness of Christian faith and hope to be assured that the facts involved are not the invention of the first disciples, nor the result of reflection on the part of the growing Christian community, but historical realities vouched for from the beginning and attested by eyewitnesses who could not be mistaken.

Now if the Gospels were works of the second century, written by unknown authors or produced by reflection and discussion within the Christian

community, we could not have the same assurance of their trustworthiness. It would be difficult in such a case to maintain that the original tradition had not undergone transformation as it travelled downwards, and to show that the Gospel record was free from admixture of exaggeration and embellishment. But if we can have good reason for holding that the Gospels—and with them the Acts of the Apostles—were written within the lifetime of men who had seen the Lord, and if we can trace them to writers who were either credible eyewitnesses themselves or took pains to ascertain from eyewitnesses and trustworthy authorities the truth of what they record, then we may have confidence that the portrait they have drawn for us is the real Christ, that He actually performed those mighty works, and spake as never man spake, and died upon the Cross, and rose from the grave, and ascended to heaven for our redemption.

It is true there are those who decline to admit that the Gospels are more credible and trustworthy because they are contemporary records. Professor Schmiedel says:¹ “If our Gospels could be shown to be written from 50 A.D. onwards, or even earlier, we should not be under any necessity to withdraw our conclusion as to their

¹ *Encyclopædia Biblica*, art. “Gospels.”

contents; we should, on the contrary, only have to say that the indubitable transformation in the original tradition had taken place much more rapidly than one might have been ready to suppose. The credibility of the Gospel history cannot be established by the earlier dating of the Gospels." No! because no evidence, in the judgment of Schmiedel, could attest a miracle, the old doctrine of David Hume a century and a half ago. Professor Harnack, after having shown by a scholarly and elaborate argument that Luke the Physician, the author of the Third Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles, was the fellow-worker and companion in travel of St Paul, and that his Gospel, depending to a considerable extent upon St Mark, fell within the days of the Apostles, guards himself against holding that St Luke's narrative is therefore more reliable and trustworthy as a record of facts.¹ This is doctrine that can only be maintained in the teeth of the established canons of historical credibility. Strauss did not go to the length of critical hardihood professed by these two scholars. He has said in his 'Life of Jesus': "It would most unquestionably be an argument of decisive weight in favour of the credibility of the Biblical history could it be shown that it was written by eyewitnesses, or

¹ Lucas der Arzt, p. 159 ff. (English trans.)

even by persons nearly contemporaneous with the events narrated" (p. 55). We can meet the dictum of the Berlin Professor with the judgment of a scholar of our own, not one whit behind Professor Harnack, in a field where both have a well-established pre-eminence. "In no other department of historical criticism," says Sir William Ramsay, "except Biblical, would any scholar dream of saying, or dare to say, that accounts are not more trustworthy if they can be traced back to authors who were children at the time the events occurred, and who were in year-long, confidential, and intimate relations with actors in these events, than they would be if they were composed by writers one or two generations younger, who had personal acquaintance with few or none of the actors and contemporaries."¹ This judgment is in accordance alike with the canons of historical credibility and with the dictates of common-sense. We would not withdraw the Gospels from the tests of literary and historical criticism. But we claim that their genuineness and credibility should be admitted when those tests have been applied and they have satisfied them.

¹ *Expositor*, December 1906.