

III.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK: ITS HISTORICAL VALUE.

Μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν τῇδε κακέεισε ἀποδιδράσκεις.

CELSUS, *ap. Origen*, i 380.

S. MARK'S Gospel being the main source of information we possess for the general course of our Lord's Ministry, it is most important to determine its trustworthiness as a historical document. The problem before us, therefore, is still one of objective external history, and the general aim of this present Lecture will perhaps best be understood if I put it in the form of a question: Does the story of Jesus Christ, as given in S. Mark, approve itself as an adequately historical outline of the main events? We shall be ready perhaps to admit that this or that detail is inaccurately told or too cursorily treated, but we want to discover whether the work as a whole gives a faithful view. Above all, are we dealing with a piece of history, however popular and unscientific; or is the

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work mainly mythical, a fancy picture cast in an historical form?

It is obvious that no guarantees of age or authorship can give us the assurance we need, and that we must ultimately rely on internal evidence. If the picture presented in S. Mark's Gospel be in essentials true, it will give an essentially reasonable account of the Ministry. I do not mean it will contain no stories of what are called 'miracles,' or that we should at once be able without misgiving to accept every incident as having actually occurred in the way related. But if this Gospel be in the main historical, it will have two characteristics; it will be generally self-consistent, and it will fit in with the known political and social history of the time. We know from non-Christian historians, notably from Josephus, something of the general history and condition of Palestine about AD 30; and we know from Jewish sources, both Talmudic and pseud-epigraphic, something of the culture and the hopes and fears of the Jewish population in the first century. If S. Mark's Gospel be an historical work, it will fit into this framework. Furthermore, if it be in the main historical, it will not lend itself easily to attempts which seek to explain the Gospel as a work designed to set forth particular doctrines or theories about Jesus and the Church.

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All these conditions I venture to think satisfied. Let us consider for a moment what are the contents of the Gospel according to S. Mark. Let us approach as outsiders, as persons desirous of a preliminary general view. We read in Mark that the public ministry of Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth in Galilee, took its rise from the preaching of John the Baptizer. The preaching of John had chiefly attracted the people of Judæa, but Jesus had gone down from Galilee and had been baptized. At the moment of Baptism He hears a voice from Heaven calling Him the beloved Son of God, but His public career does not begin until John was cast into prison by Herod Antipas. Then Jesus comes to Galilee announcing the Kingdom of God to be at hand, and exhorting men to repent and believe the message. How long the first period lasted we have no means of judging, for it is not until Simon and his companions join the new Prophet that the narrative becomes detailed. At first Jesus teaches in the Synagogues, and His commanding personality produces a great effect. But the very success of the announcement of the Gospel brings interruptions to the work which are far more clearly brought out as such in Mark than elsewhere, viz. the intrusion of invalids in season and out of season, seeking for cures and

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acquiring for Jesus a kind of popularity which He definitely tries to avoid ; and the growing opposition of the official Jewish world, both religious and secular. These points afford a very remarkable testimony to the historical value of Mark, as they are features which can hardly have been supplied by later reflexion, and therefore must have been derived from real historical reminiscence. The way in which the story of the leper is told—the cure importuned and the man sent away with almost fierce injunctions of silence, and then the man's disobedient and unseasonable publication of his cure, so that Jesus is obliged to keep in the open country for privacy—goes far to shew that cures of this kind actually took place. Naturally we do not know enough about the details to found any medical doctrine on the cures. As Dr. Sanday says : 'We may be sure that if the miracles of the first century had been wrought before trained spectators of the nineteenth, the version of them would be quite different.'¹ I doubt if the evidence suffices for us to go very much beyond this admirably cautious statement. What does appear certain is this, that the final rupture of Jesus with the religious authorities in Galilee arose out of the healing of the man with

¹ *Dictionary of the Bible*, ii 625, art. 'Jesus Christ.'

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the withered hand in the Synagogue on the Sabbath.

This event, according to Mark, was the parting of the ways. The religious leaders decide to get rid of Jesus by the help of the friends of the Herodian government; while Jesus, on the other hand, begins to organise His followers into what was destined to develop into the Christian Church. He no longer preaches in the Synagogues, save once (and that unsuccessfully) in His own home,¹ and for the remainder of His ministry His main efforts are directed towards preparing His disciples for the trials in store for Him and them. For this purpose, and for present safety, Jesus more and more avoids appearing in public, much of the remaining time being spent out of Galilee, away from the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, or else in the open country far from the main routes. Shortly before the breach with the Scribes and Pharisees it had been early spring.² In the following year Jesus determines to go up to Jerusalem for the Passover, though fully aware that it can lead to no earthly victory. While still in the territory of Antipas He remains as much concealed as possible, but in the Roman province of Judæa He resumes public teaching, and enters

¹ Mk vi 1 *εἰς τὴν πατρίδα αὐτοῦ*: the name *Nazareth* is only mentioned by Mark in i 9.

² Mk ii 23.