

**THE COMMON TRADITION
OF THE SYNOPTIC
GOSPELS IN THE TEXT
OF THE REVISED VERSION**

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The Common Tradition of the Synoptic Gospels in the Text of the Revised Version by Edwin A. Abbott & W. G. Rushbrooke

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INTRODUCTION.

I.—TO THE GENERAL READER.

1.—THE OBJECT OF THIS BOOK.

TURNING over the pages of this Harmony of the Synoptic Gospels the reader will at once notice a number of words in **black type**. On examination, he will find that the same, or nearly the same black type recurs in each of the three columns representing Mark, Matthew, and Luke; or, in other words, that this black type exhibits the matter common to the first three Evangelists. If he will then take the trouble to run his eye over the black type, taken by itself, he will perceive that these words, though extracted out of narratives, constitute a kind of narrative by themselves, a Tradition of the words and deeds of Christ. Since this Tradition is common to the first three Gospels, it may, for convenience, be called the Common or Triple Tradition.

The object of this book is to place before English readers this Common Tradition, as being a tradition *earlier than any of our existing Gospels*, and consequently exhibiting the closest approximation we possess to some parts of the original narrative from which our Gospels are derived.¹

Of course the importance of this Tradition depends upon the fact that the three Evangelists borrowed independently from it. When any judge, or jury, is engaged in weighing evidence, special importance will naturally be attached to all such statements as are made not by one witness, but by several, *provided they have had no communication with one another*. A fact stated by one witness

¹ It is intended, in due course, to publish a separate volume containing the "Double Tradition," that is to say, the portions of the Synoptic narrative common to Mark and Matthew, Mark and Luke, Matthew and Luke; and also the passages peculiar to each of the three Synoptists.

alone may be accepted if the witness himself is generally credible: but obviously all such once-supported evidence stands on an entirely different footing from evidence twice or thrice independently supported. Admitting the honesty of the witness, we may doubt his exactness of statement, his acuteness of observation, his power of distinguishing facts from inferences. These, and other causes combine to make us assent to the maxim of the Levitical Law, "In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established." And as regards statements of supreme importance, we may accept the dictum of Philo—which has also been adopted by the author of the Epistles of St. John (1 John v. 8, 9)—that: "A sacred matter is tested by three witnesses." For these reasons the Tradition common to our three earliest Gospels assumes a very high importance, on the hypothesis that the three Evangelists bear independent testimony to its pre-existence and authority.

Closely though the Synoptists in some passages agree, yet the independence of their testimony requires in these days no proof. Few reasonable sceptics now assert, as early Christian Fathers once did, that "Mark abbreviated Matthew and Luke," or that any one of the three first Evangelists had before him the work of either of the other two. Proof, if proof were needed, might easily be derived from a perusal of the pages of the following Harmony, which would shew a number of divergences, half-agreements, incomplete statements, omissions, incompatible, as a whole, with the hypothesis of borrowing. And, therefore, the unlearned reader may rest assured that at least no suspicion of collusion or dependence between the three earliest writers of the life of Christ need impair his acceptance of the Triple or Common Tradition.

But the independence of the three witnesses does not prevent one of the three from being earlier than the other two, and from approximating more closely than the rest to the Original Tradition from which all three are descended. On this point there has been difference of opinion: but the general consent of competent critics has, of late years, pointed toward Mark as the earliest of the three Evangelists. Or rather, to speak more accurately, it is believed that the Gospel of St. Mark *contains* a closer approximation to the Original Tradition, than is *contained* in the other Synoptists. Parts of St. Mark's Gospel are so full and ample on small and special points, as to suggest that the writer sometimes added a good deal from his own knowledge to the Tradition which he had before him; but for the most part it will be found that Mark contains very little which is not found either in Matthew or in Luke.

It is possible to demonstrate that, at all events in some passages, Mark *contains the whole of a Tradition from which Matthew and Luke borrowed parts*; but the proof, though not complicated, requires a little more reflection than is usually given to statements made in a mere introduction of this kind. However, the reader will have

little difficulty in appreciating it, if he will give a moment's consideration to the following proposition:—

In the case of three narratives A, B, and C (e.g. Mark, Matthew, and Luke), if A contains much that is common to A and B alone, and much that is common to A and C alone, and all that is common to B and C, it follows generally that A contains the whole of some narrative from which B and C have borrowed parts.

The important clause in this proposition is that "A contains all that is common to B and C," in other words, that Mark contains (as happens in some passages) *all that is common to Matthew and Luke*. For how could this happen (to the extent to which it occasionally happens, not amounting to a word or phrase or two, but to a considerable part of the whole) on the supposition that Mark borrowed from Matthew and Luke? Mark could only have achieved such a result by *carefully underlining all the words common to Matthew and Luke's narratives*, and by then writing a narrative of his own, which should include all these words and yet preserve the natural style of an original composition. "The difficulty of doing this is enormous, and will be patent to any one who will try to perform a similar literary feat himself. To embody *the whole* of even one document in a narrative of one's own without copying it *verbatim*, and to do this in a free and natural manner, requires no little care; but to take two documents, to put them side by side and analyse their common matter, and then to write a narrative, graphic, abrupt, and in all respects the opposite of artificial, which shall contain every word that is common to both—this would be a *tour de force* even for a skilful literary forger of these days, and may be dismissed as an impossibility for the writer of the Second Gospel."¹

But if Mark did not combine Matthew and Luke, it follows that (since the resemblance is far too close to be accounted for as accidental) Matthew and Luke must have borrowed from Mark, or—if that hypothesis be dismissed, as it must be—from some common tradition which is embodied in Mark. This will explain all the phenomena of the Triple Tradition. The two later writers, *borrowing independently from the Original Tradition (which is contained in Mark)* would agree with one another *only so far as they borrowed*, or in other words *would contain nothing in common which was not also in Mark*. For the rest, Matthew would borrow this, and Luke that; so that when all that had been borrowed from Mark,² was deducted from Mark, very little would be left that

¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. x. p. 791, article "Gospels."

² When we speak of "borrowing from Mark," we mean "borrowing from the Original Tradition contained in Mark;" and this expression will be occasionally used for brevity.

Where Matthew and Luke agree in slight deviations from Mark, they probably used some "similar edition" of the Original Tradition, from which there had

could be set down as peculiar to Mark. Hence (in the following Harmony), when the reader looks down the left-hand column which represents the "portions peculiar to Mark," he need not be surprised at sometimes finding little but a group of words such as "and," "straightway," "that," and the other mannerisms of the Evangelist. This paucity of "peculiar matter" is a tribute to the faithfulness with which Mark followed, without enlarging, the Original Tradition.

From the superiority of Mark's Gospel, in respect of date, it must not be inferred that his narrative, wherever it covers the same ground, enables us to dispense with those of Matthew and Luke. On the contrary, it is sometimes extremely abrupt and obscure, and apparently has been so confused as to require illustration by means of the other two Synoptists. Take for example the following passage:—

MARK XIV. 65.
And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to buffet him, and to say unto him, Prophecy: and the officers received him with blows.

MATTHEW XXVI. 67, 68.
Then did they spit in his face and buffet him, but others smote him, saying, (68) Prophecy to us. When Christ, who is it that smote thee?

LUKE XXII. 63, 64.
And the men that held him, mocked him: (64) and covering his eyes (Gr. him) they asked him saying, Prophecy, Who is it that smote thee?

Here the meaning of the mocking command to "prophecy" is not clear in Mark's narrative. It suggests the question "Prophecy? About what?" And we are also left to ask, "What was the object of 'covering his face'?"

Still more obscure is Matthew. For here we find Jesus requested by the soldiers to "prophecy" who smote him; yet, so far as Matthew's narrative goes, we cannot in the least understand how there could be any difficulty in telling, without any recourse to "prophecy," who it was that smote Jesus, since the smiters (so far as Matthew informs us) were visible. It is reserved for Luke, the latest of the three Synoptists, to make all clear by combining the two traditions, 1st, the *blindfolding*; 2nd, the command to prophecy *who it was that smote him*, when blindfolded.

Yet the very obscurity and abruptness of Mark's Gospel are indications of the early date at which it was committed to writing; for what is obscure and abrupt in an early tradition may naturally be corrected by later editors into what is clear and smooth; but no one would be tempted to substitute abrupt obscurity for original clearness and smoothness.

been removed some of the abruptness perceptible in Mark's form of the Tradition.

Where Matthew and Luke agree, and Mark is altogether wanting, they borrowed from some document or tradition, containing the parables and longer discourses of Christ.

A comparison of the Gospel of Luke, in the original, with that of St. Mark would place beyond doubt the conclusion that the educated physician who composed the third of our Synoptic Gospels, altered many words and expressions in the Earlier Tradition, in conformity with a more exact and polite usage: but in most instances a knowledge of Greek is required to appreciate such a demonstration. One or two examples, however, may be made intelligible to the English reader. In the Stilling of the Tempest (see pp. 32-35) Matthew and Mark speak of Jesus, on the lake of Gennesaret, "rebuking the sea" (Mark iv. 39, Matthew viii. 26) and describe how "even the wind and the sea" obey Jesus. In both cases Luke uses "water" or "waters." This might be thought an accident, but it is not. For in the Exorcism of the Gadarene (pp. 36, 37), whereas Mark and Matthew use the word "sea" (Mark v. 13, Matthew viii. 32), Luke uses "lake;" and this makes clear the motive of his correction. He objects to the application of the word "sea," where "lake" is more appropriate. Again in Mark ii. 4-9, 11, 12 we find four times repeated a word "bed," concerning which it is said by the grammarian Phrynichus that "only the *canaille* use this word;" consequently Matthew (ix. 2) and Luke (v. 18) substitute for it (pp. 10-13) the word "couch;"¹ and when Luke finds himself compelled to repeat the word, he resorts to the word "little couch" (Luke v. 19, 24) rather than employ a word condemned by polite usage.

But these trifling, though frequent, peculiarities of grammatical expression are insignificant, as compared with the differences of *thought*, which may be noted in the following pages, distinguishing the earlier from the later Evangelists. It is a cogent proof of the early date of Mark that this Gospel contains many expressions, which, although no doubt historically accurate, would be likely to be stumbling-blocks in the way of weak believers; so that they are omitted in the later Gospels, and would not have been tolerated except in a Tradition of extreme antiquity. For example, after Mark has described, in language closely resembling that of Matthew, the return of Jesus to his home at Nazareth, the two Evangelists conclude thus (see pp. 40, 41):—

MARK VI. 5.
And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief.

MATTHEW XIII. 58.
And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

¹ This is one of the few cases in which the Revisers (very justifiably avoiding the charge of pedantry) have not attempted to represent in English the differences of the Greek words. It will be noted that in pp. 10, 11, although the word "bed" is used by all three Synoptists, it is not printed in black type. This indicates that, though the English is the same in all three, the Greek is not the same.