

# **THE OLDEST GOSPEL**

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The oldest Gospel by Matthew

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**MATTHEW**

# **THE OLDEST GOSPEL**



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*Passages from the First Canonical Gospel, supposed to form the Original Hebrew Gospel written by Matthew the Apostle, translated into English; with an Introduction.*



WILLIAMS AND NORGATE,

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## INTRODUCTION.

### 1.

EVERY Christian desires to obtain as accurate a knowledge as possible of the teachings of Jesus Christ, and in consequence treasures the gospels in which he finds those teachings recorded. Criticism has shown us however that there is very great difficulty in deciding how far certain verses, and even certain chapters, in these gospels are to be depended on as genuine, since the authorship of the gospels, the process by which they came into their present form, and the extent to which additions have been made to them by later hands, are all matters on which the learned differ in opinion. Remembering these facts, many persons are almost in despair of obtaining any exact and trustworthy information as to what Christ taught; they feel as though the foundations of Christianity were shaken. To meet this difficulty, I here aim at producing a translation of the earliest Christian Scripture containing the teachings of Christ,—and giving the discourses of Jesus, as they were preserved by one of the Apostles. How far there is sufficient ground for supposing this can be done, the reader must judge from the contents of these introductory pages. If there is even an approach towards success in the undertaking, the result will be full of interest and instruction to every religious thinker.

### 2.

The origin and mutual relations of the first three gospels form a problem that has been the subject of much critical investigation. The clue to its solution is furnished by Dr. Réville in his "*Etudes Critiques sur l'Evangile selon S. Matthieu.*" To that work I refer those who wish to pursue the investigation, merely stating here its result. This is—that our first gospel, as it now stands in the Greek Testament,

consists of *four* parts; 1. A collection of the discourses of Jesus, first written in Hebrew by Matthew, and here translated into Greek; 2. An anecdotic gospel, written by Mark, of which the second canonical gospel is for the most part a reproduction; 3. A certain number of traditionary narratives; 4. Some additions introduced by the writer who reduced the whole into its present form. The two latter parts comprise only a very small proportion of the whole.

The general tradition of antiquity informs us that Matthew wrote in Hebrew. Especially Papias, who lived in the former half of the second century, says "Matthew wrote the *discourses* in the Hebrew language, and each one translated them as he could." The first canonical gospel contains discourses of Jesus, which answer to the description of Papias, and when you take these away, the remainder corresponds very nearly with the second canonical gospel. These passages, which do not appear in the second gospel, have a peculiar character of their own, and one that is entirely in favour of the supposition that they are the work of Matthew. The theory that thus accounts for the peculiar relations of the two first gospels has the general assent of modern critics in its favour, and may be regarded as established.

We have then in these "Discourses" of Jesus, written originally in Hebrew, by Matthew (or Levi) one of the first Christian writings ever produced, and the earliest record of the teachings of the Founder of our Religion.

## 8.

If the first canonical gospel, as we possess it, is founded on "discourses of Jesus" written by Matthew, is it possible to separate the component parts? Can we, by a process of analysis, obtain the original work of Matthew? In answer to these questions, it has been already pointed out that there is in the first gospel a series of discourses, which have nothing corresponding to them in the second gospel; and that when we take away these discourses from the first, what is left corresponds nearly entirely with the second, while portions of the discourses are found scattered through the third, gospel. Now the passages thus peculiar to the first gospel have, as I have said, a character of their own; they contain—the phrase "kingdom of



heaven," 32 times, while it is never found in the second gospel;—the phrase "Father in heaven," 22 times, while it occurs only once in the second gospel. Besides these and other verbal peculiarities, they have a special reference throughout to the establishment of a coming reign of the Messiah, and are marked by a prevailing Judaism of tone. On these grounds Dr. Réville indicates certain portions of the first gospel, as being translations of the Hebrew "discourses of Jesus," which was the work of Matthew. I have for the most part adopted his conclusions, omitting only a few verses as to which there seemed some doubt, because I desire to include no sections which may not with tolerable certainty be attributed to Matthew.

## 4.

The "discourses" written by Matthew, seem to have formed a systematic whole, with a specific design, namely to exhibit the teachings of Jesus in regard to a coming "kingdom of heaven." This is spoken of as though it was about to be established in some external, visible form, and its benefits were to be confined to a certain portion of mankind, those prepared at its establishment, for its reception. At the same time many expressions are used which seem appropriate only to a spiritual influence. That Jesus had come on earth to inaugurate this kingdom, and that he would, ere long, come again to consummate it, seems the central idea. Dr. Réville regards the Seven Discourses as all distinctly referable to this central idea, and names them 1. The Legislation, 2. The Propagation, 3. The Apology, 4. The Description, 5. The Hierarchy or the Internal Relations, 6. The Maledictions, 7. The Establishment. This is probably an attempt to attribute to the "discourses," a definite system more appropriate to a modern French theologian than to an ancient Hebrew apostle. But it is possible to trace some thread of unity running through the whole, and the perception of this adds to the interest with which we study the successive discourses. I have attempted, in the analysis, to indicate the general scope and intention of the writing, but I have kept the analysis separate from the translation of the writing itself, that this may be left without interference to produce its due impression on the mind of the reader.

The text from which my translation is made is substantially that of Griesbach. But whenever the Sinaitic and Vatican M.S.S. agree in a reading I have adopted that reading. In most cases this consists in the omission of words found in the received text, and the variations are seldom of much importance. I have endeavoured to make the translation as literal as possible, and to place the English reader, as far as I can, on a level with one who understands Greek, by an exact representation of the original. In a few passages, where it seemed necessary in order to express the meaning accurately, I have added a free translation or paraphrase in a note. The quotations from the Old Testament are indicated by the peculiar printing, and the exact references are added in the margin. When it is necessary to insert words in the English which have no corresponding words in the Greek, these are included in brackets.

The Greek word translated "heaven" is in the singular when it denotes the material heavens, as in the phrase "heaven and earth shall pass away," but in the plural when it refers to a spiritual state, as in "Our Father who art in heaven." Whenever it is in this plural form, I indicate this in the translation by printing it in inverted commas,—"heaven."

In some cases I have ventured to transpose the sections in order to make the connection of the several parts more evident.

It has been my wish always to translate each Greek word by the same English word, but there are cases in which this cannot be done, if the passage is to be fully and correctly understood by the unlearned reader. Thus, the same word sometimes means simply 'a religious teacher' and sometimes one of the recognised Hebrew 'prophets.' In some passages to translate it 'prophet' gives the false idea that an inspired utterer of predictions is referred to, and in others to translate it 'teacher' destroys the historical reference it there conveys. So the same word is translated 'life' or 'soul.' We cannot translate Matt. vi. 25, 'Be not anxious for your *soul* what ye shall eat,' nor Matt. x. 28, 'Fear him who is able to destroy both *life* and body in Gehenna.' The Greek word means in some cases 'life,' and in others the 'immortal part of man which survives the body's death,' and the sense

of each passage must show us which of these meanings to assign to it. Gehenna is translated 'hell' in the common English Bible. I have preferred to retain the Hebrew word. Its original meaning was the valley of Hinnom where the filth of the city and the corpses of malefactors were cast. Hence it came to be used for any extremely severe punishment, and figurately for the state of the wicked after death. It frequently has traces of both these meanings united.

These explanations will serve to indicate that my desire throughout has been to meet the wants of the unlearned but thoughtful reader. The scholar will find nothing new to him, nothing he cannot gain from his Greek Testament for himself. Even he may however be struck with the picture which these portions of the first gospel present of a homogeneous composition, when thus detached from their context. By the careful perusal of them, as far as possible with an unprejudiced mind, we arrive, I feel convinced, at an accurate idea of what Christianity was among the first followers of Jesus.