

Was There an Earlier Gospel?

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The finding of the logia a few weeks ago assumes, under the critical examination of Prof. J. Rendel Harris, of Cambridge, England, importance of a much higher degree than was at first attributed to it. Professor Harris not only concludes that the antiquity of the document is demonstrated and that it records actual sayings of Jesus, but he considers that it carries us back behind the existing Gospel records to a source that contained more than they contain and from which they were probably derived. In other words, the logia are an indication of a Gospel or Gospels earlier and fuller than any of our canonical gospels.

The existence of such earlier records has been inferred by some of the critics, notably Resch, from the variations in New Testament readings and from the quotations of the early fathers. In Professor Harris's view these critics are now vindicated and their opponents, such as Lightfoot, and Westcott, are overthrown on this point. Says Professor Harris (*Contemporary Review*, September):

Here, for the first time, we are definitely introduced to a new stratum in the history of the evangelic literature, which may be only separated from the lowest stratum of the deposited tradition by the fact of a translation from Hebrew to Greek. That is to say, *we are behind the Gospels*. Once again the higher critics have turned out to be right and the conservatives wrong, for the latter have steadily ignored the existence of written documents underlying our canonical gospels, while the former have recognized their existence, and have used the critical art to recover them. Yesterday there were no logia in the minds of the majority of English-speaking critics; to-day every one is talking logia. And when one reads over, in the light of the present discovery, the laborious attempts made by Westcott, in his 'History of the Canon,' to prove that the variations in the evangelical quotations of the fathers are not due to the use of extra-canonical sources, the conviction is overwhelming that he was defending an untenable position."

To establish the "extreme antiquity" of the logia, Professor Harris pays careful attention to logion number two, translated "Unless ye fast to the world [literally fast the world] ye shall not see the father." (For the full Greek text of the logia, see *Literary Digest*, August 7). He finds that parallel expressions are used by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* iii. p. 556) in which the expressions keeping the Sabbath and fasting to the world means refraining from all sin on that day, fasting according to the law from base actions and according to the Gospel from wicked imaginations. The expressions must be taken mystically: "*they have no-*

thing to do with fasting or keeping the Sabbath in the common sense.” This is “the new fast” about which Justin speaks in his dialog with Trypho, and he uses the very same expression “sabbatize the sabbath” used in the logion. In the same expressions we may also trace the language of Peter (I Peter, ii, 10) and of the teaching of the apostles. After developing these facts, Professor Harris proceeds:

We have now examined carefully into the meaning of this logion, and we have concluded it to be just as primitive as any of those of its companions that go under the name of canonical Gospel. The idea that it involved the obligation of fasting and Sabbath-keeping is the exact opposite of the truth.

Now the effect of this discovery of the antiquity of the recovered matter upon the criticism of the ‘gospels can not fail to be great: for we find not only that we are behind the gospels, but that *there was more in the sources of the Gospels than is conserved in the Gospels themselves.*

The next thing that is clear is that we have to do with something more than an oral tradition preceding our gospels. We shall probe this by actually recovering by critical methods the opening sentences of the *Ur-Evangelium*, in one at least of its primitive forms.

Professor Harris then proceeds to quote from Paul (Acts. xx. 35), Clement of Rome (Epistle, ch. xiii. and ch. xlvi.) and Polycarp (Epistle to the Philippians, ch. li.) in which such expressions as “remember the words of the Lord Jesus, for thus he said,” strongly suggest the repeated use in the logia of “Jesus says.” From these coincidences he infers the opening sentence of the yet unrecovered *Ur-Evangelium* which he thinks preceded our Gospels. We quote him again:

Here we have the same peculiarity – viz., a quotation of logia, not from our Gospels, with a prologue about the remembrance of what He said. And we have noticed the phenomenon four times. We conclude that it was the introductory formula of the book, which must have run something like this:

“We ought to remember what things our Lord said in His teaching, for He said . . .”

And then probably follows the first logion.

“How ancient this collection must have been, if we find it quoted by Paul, by Clement of Rome, and by Polycarp!

The critical importance of this attempt to restore the opening of a primitive collection of logia is very great. On the one hand it gives us the suggestion of an earlier gospel or gospels than any of our existing volumes. On the other hand, it prevents our quoting Clement and Polycarp as attesting the antiquity of the canonical gospels. And this means a possible lowering of our idea of the antiquity of the extant Synoptists.

We conclude, moreover, from a study of the variants in the recovered logia that there is reason to believe not only in the existence of much precanonical evangelic matter, but also (we refer especially to the reading,

“a city *built* on a hill,’ in the seventh *Logion*, whose origin Resch divined so acutely) in the influence that the extra-evangelic documents have had on the transmission of the text of the canonical Gospels.

EXCERPTS FROM THE OXYRHYNCHUS SAYINGS OF JESUS IN RELATION TO THE GOSPEL-MAKING MOVEMENT OF THE FIRST AND SECOND CENTURIES

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THROUGH the skillful labors of Drs. Grenfell and Hunt, excavators for the Egypt Exploration Fund, we have recently come into possession of three short portions of extra-canonical second-century gospels. The first portion, consisting of eight Sayings of Jesus, was found in 1897 ; the second portion, consisting of an introduction and five Sayings of Jesus, was found in 1903 ; and the third portion, consisting of several Sayings on different bits of papyrus, was also found in 1903. We may designate the three portions as the first, second, and third series, respectively. All three portions were unearthed at Oxyrhynchus, one of the chief centers of early Christianity in Egypt, one hundred and twenty miles south of Cairo. The fragments of papyrus upon which these sayings are preserved were discovered in conjunction with a very large collection of Greek papyri dating from the first to the seventh centuries of our era.

The first series of Sayings is written upon a leaf of a papyrus book. The verso of the leaf is numbered 11, showing that the Sayings belonged to a collection from which this leaf has become separated. The leaf is written on both sides, three Sayings on the verso, one Saying divided between the two sides, and four on the recto. The text is in an excellent state of preservation, so that little conjecture was necessary to restore it, except in the case of the fourth Saying, which is almost entirely illegible. The second series is written upon a fragment of papyrus which has been severed from some portion of a papyrus roll. The writing is in a single column on the back of the paper, the face of the paper containing a portion of a surveyor's record. The fragment containing these Sayings is torn or broken along the middle of the text-column, so that the right-hand half of the lines is entirely gone. The text of the left half of the column is in good preservation except at the bottom, where much of the fifth Saying is destroyed at the beginning as well as at the end of the lines. The third series is con-

tained in eight fragments of a papyrus roll; only three of the fragments contain enough text to make restoration possible.

The palaeographical data of these manuscript fragments show that they were written about the middle of the third century A.D. The letters are of the good, medium-sized uncial form belonging to the third century; the character of the writing shows that the manuscripts were carefully and expensively prepared for general use.

The Oxyrhynchus Sayings are in part parallel to the sayings of Jesus preserved in the canonical gospels, somewhat more than one-half of the new material duplicating what is contained there, but in form these passages exhibit considerable differences from the canonical accounts and not a small degree of independence. The parallels cover sayings in all four of the canonical gospels, indicating that such material as the latter contain was in general circulation at the time the Oxyrhynchus documents arose, but also that there was no fixed and exclusive form of these memorabilia of Jesus. [If Grenfell and Hunt's division of the verses is correct. This, however, is very uncertain ; many scholars prefer to treat their " fourth " Saying as a portion of the third, making but seven Sayings in the first series.]

There are also in the three series some very important Sayings which the canonical gospels do not contain. Several of these have parallels in extra-canonical gospel sayings quoted by the Church Fathers of the second and third centuries; a few have no parallels in any Christian literature. The interpretation of these rarer Sayings is perplexing. A thorough discussion by many scholars has already been given to the Sayings of the first series, which have been under consideration for seven years. Those of the second and third series have only recently been made public, and have still to receive thorough discussion. The chief problems of their interpretation, however, have been studied in connection with the first series. A consensus of opinion has been reached that the Sayings of 1897 do not show any doctrinal bias in the interest of or in opposition to any of the great controversies of the second and third Christian centuries. This means that they were traditional rather than manufactured for particular purposes. There is no sufficient ground for denying them a first-century origin. The same is true of the Sayings of 1903.

But are they to be attributed to Jesus himself? With regard to the major portion of the Sayings in the three series there is certainly no reason for questioning their substantial authenticity, since they are also found in the canonical gospels and in both places bear the marks of genuineness. It is only with regard to the minor portion of the Sayings, those which have no canonical parallels, that the question is problematic, and these must be considered individually, each upon its own merits. Some have support in the extra-canonical Christian literature, others do not. Some have more evident marks of authenticity than others.

[The Saying which has been most variously interpreted is that in I. 5, "Jesus saith, Wherever there are (two), they are not without God, and wherever there is one alone, I say, I am with him. Raise the stone and there thou shalt find me; cleave the wood and there am I" (restoration and translation of Drs. Grenfell and Hunt). The first portion of the Saying has a general parallel in Matt. 18:20, and should furnish the clue to the interpretation of the second portion. The thought then will be of the constant presence of Christ everywhere with his disciples, even in their daily toil (so Harnack, Lock, and Sanday). It is scarcely to be understood as an anticipation of the theory of the immanence of God in nature, or as an evidence of animistic conceptions. Swete takes the language allegorically, "Christ is with the disciple who is a builder of Christianity." Barnes also interprets allegorically, making the "stone" refer to the sepulcher, and the "wood" to the cross, of Jesus. James interprets, "You must make an effort if you wish to find me." E. A. Abbott and Schmiedel make the "raising of stones" refer to children of Abraham, and "cleaving the wood" to cutting down the barren tree of Pharisaic conventional law (cf. Matt. 3:10, Jer. 1:8-10). Bacon thinks of the ritual of sacrifice, "Prepare an altar, pile up the stone, cleave the wood for fire, and I shall be there in your worship."]

The external evidence for these Sayings, which cannot alone establish their authenticity, is rather favorable than adverse; but the final decision rests with their intrinsic probability. Here different interpreters have taken and will take different views. A Saying which seems to one interpreter to be in accordance with the point of view, the spirit, the teaching, and the manner of Jesus, may seem to another interpreter out of character, so diverse are the present conceptions of Jesus. Further, the meaning of the Sayings is not in all cases certain; some understand them in a sense germane to Jesus, others in a sense which it would be difficult to attribute to him. While, therefore, we cannot expect a complete agreement of scholars, there is good reason to predicate substantial authenticity of all the Oxyrhynchus Sayings.

Of course we find here, as we find abundantly in the canonical gospels, that the primary interest of the first-century Christians was not to preserve the exact form of Jesus' utterances — they were primarily concerned with preserving his ideas, his teachings. They felt themselves free to translate his Aramaic utterances into Greek, and to make such modifications of form and adaptations of meaning as seemed to them most helpful in their practical work. The canonical gospels, in their parallel accounts of Jesus' Sayings, exhibit variations of form which the tradition assumed. We are therefore prepared to find that still other forms of similar utterances appear in these recently discovered Sayings. But that does not militate against their substantial authenticity. It is probably true that the Oxyrhynchus Sayings for

which there are no parallels have likewise departed, little or much, from the exact form which Jesus gave them; and it may be that the exact turn of thought or shade of meaning which belonged to the original utterances has not always been perfectly preserved. Still, such departure is not to be alleged so long as it is possible to harmonize these newly found teachings with the Jesus whom we know.

. . . The consensus of opinion is that the Sayings are independent of all other known gospels, even where parallelisms exist. Similarly, those Sayings which have parallels in the patristic literature give evidence of being from independent tradition, and nearer to the original form. In other words, the gospels to which these Oxyrhynchus Sayings belonged were collections of the memorabilia of Jesus, which arose out of the gospel-making movement of the first and second centuries, and were parallel with its other products. They gathered up material from the great stream of transmission of the gospel-story which flowed through the first century and into the first half of the second century.

The evidence is entirely against the crude view (sometimes held) that when the second century opened the four canonical gospels held the field exclusively, as though the gospel-making movement of the first century stopped abruptly at 100 A.D. This was certainly not the case. The canonical gospels, at least the first three, entered the second century with great prominence and prestige ; they were the finest and most used products of the gospel-making process in the first century. But there was still to be a long period through which many other gospels were to compete with them for popular favor.

In spite of the fact that the first century had created four preeminent gospels, certain Christians still undertook to make other compilations of the memorabilia of Jesus — not a strange occurrence, for there are always those who prefer to make their own books rather than use the books of others, even though their own are inferior. Besides, these new collections were of a different character from the canonical gospels. Instead of weaving together the sayings and the deeds of Jesus, as had been done in the four New Testament books, the gospels indicated by the Oxyrhynchus Sayings were collections of the Sayings of Jesus almost exclusively. Also, in the gospel or gospels of which the first and second series were a part, Jesus' utterances were grouped together apparently without much relation to one another, and each was introduced by the formula, "Jesus says." The introductory verse of the second series of Sayings indicates that the collection was in a literary way connected with the name of Thomas and possibly of other apostles; or perhaps, as Professor Swete thinks, different divisions of the same book were headed by the names of different apostles.

It is possible that the collections of Jesus' Sayings indicated by the Oxyrhynchus fragments were actually composed in the first century, and indeed before the canonical gospels were

made. It is possible that they belonged to that large group of proto-gospels which Luke mentions (Lk. 1:1), and that they continued to exist from the decade 50-60 A.D. down through the subsequent years of the century when the canonical gospels arose.

The gospel-making movement in the first Christian centuries was more extensive and more complex than is commonly thought. The disciples — even during the public ministry of Jesus, and much more after that ministry had closed — remembered, repeated, taught, and circulated the sayings of Jesus and the events of his life. During the twenty years after the public ministry, the first Christians everywhere used the memorabilia of Jesus as the source of their Christian faith and practice, as the staple element of their instruction, and as the charter of their movement. It resulted that in all the churches the gospel memorabilia were known, valued, and used, and that in the larger, central churches of the first century they were gathered up into considerable collections.

Also, when the gospel was carried out into the gentile world (40-60 A.D.) and came to those who were unacquainted with the Aramaic language, the gospel story was translated into Greek piece by piece, here and there, by various individuals. And the exclusive oral tradition which had preserved the memorabilia of Jesus during the first fifteen or twenty years, was supplemented (not superseded) by written transmission, according to the custom of the gentile world. With this translation into Greek and the writing down of the gospel memorabilia for wide circulation and use in the Roman Empire, came the more advanced stages of gospel-making. . . . The gospel-making process was a movement, not the exclusive endeavor of a few individuals. To this fact Luke bears conclusive testimony (Lk. 1:1). Many proto-gospels were produced in this active period of gospel-making, but none of them have come down to us in the form in which Luke knew and spoke of them. The Logia of Matthew was largely taken up into the first and third canonical gospels, and disappeared entirely in its Aramaic, or even in its individual Greek form. A similar fate befell the other proto-gospels. They were either absorbed into the canonical gospels, or failed to perpetuate themselves because of their evident inferiority in arrangement, content, or form to the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. But these proto-gospels, inferior as they were, were not at once abandoned. They continued in vogue in certain places and among certain Christians who had compiled them or appreciated them. It is reasonable to think that some of them were in circulation even in the second century. In addition, the gospel-making process continued even after the canonical gospels had come into existence, for other Christians were still ready to try their hands at the collection of the memorabilia of Jesus, especially where this collection could be made upon certain lines essentially different from those of the canonical gospels.

We recur, therefore, to the view that it was in the early second century that the gospels

arose of which the Oxyrhynchus Sayings formed a part. These collections were in one sense an aftermath; but the authors took up in variant form from the living tradition many of the sayings of Jesus which had been gathered into the already existing gospels, so that the Sayings which have no parallels in the canonical gospels formed the smaller portion of these collections. Because these rare Sayings, which failed of preservation in the canonical gospels, are to us of greater interest than those which have canonical parallels, it does not follow that they were of greater interest than the others to the authors of the original works. The authors and the earliest readers probably counted of greatest value the Sayings for which the canonical gospels have parallels. It may well have been these, rather than the peculiar ones, which most gave the Oxyrhynchus collections vitality and circulation.

The question whether Jesus could have said this or that thing attributed to him in these fragments is one which second-century Christians would scarcely have raised, and could not well have answered. They understood fairly well, and profoundly revered, Jesus and his teaching. He was to them of supreme interest and importance. But they did not apply a rigid method of historical investigation to the oral and written tradition of his life.