

'THE SOLUTION OF THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM'.¹

MR ROBINSON SMITH comes before the world with a peculiar Solution. He holds that the Gospels were written in the order Mark, Matthew, John, Luke, and that they were written between A.D. 105 and 150, 'Luke in any case later than 132'. And further, Mr Smith holds that he has given a demonstration of his thesis; his book is a chain of connected argument, or what passes for such. A chain depends on its links: if I begin to examine Mr Smith's statements in certain matters of detail, my excuse must be that his remarkable conclusions depend in the last resort upon sweeping statements upon controversial and difficult questions, which can only be accepted from those whose word is shewn to be exact and trustworthy in matters verifiable.

I will begin with his treatment of the Sinai Palimpsest of the Old Syriac Version of the Gospels. Mr Smith has the greatest respect for this venerable monument of Christian antiquity: 'in moot-points it is nearly always right' (p. viii). I do not suppose I could ever be charged with undervaluing syr. S, but my estimate is more restrained than Mr Smith's: at least, I distinguish between the witness of S when it really leaves out disputed passages, and its non-witness when a passage is not found in S because S in its present state happens to have lost a leaf. Yet this is what Mr Smith does not do. I must quote fully to make it clear that I am not misrepresenting. Mr Smith is talking of the town Nazareth: he says (p. 49, note²)

'Mt. found the phrase there [i. e. in the Gospel acc. to the Hebrews],—He shall be called a Nazoræan (Nazoraïos)—made it prophetic, and interpreted it to mean "from a city called Nazareth", although no such town or village is known outside of the Gospels and later Christian literature until the fourth century. Jn., Lk., and Acts merely followed Mt. So did Mk., since the only place where Nazareth is mentioned in Mk. (i 9) is a late accretion, the first eleven verses of Mk. not being in the Sinaitic Syriac, which for so many other reasons commends itself to us as the earliest of texts.'

Had Mr Smith got his information about the Sinaitic Syriac from any first-hand source he would have known that there is no reason whatever to suppose that Mk. i 1-11 was not once an integral part of the Sinai

¹ *The Solution of the Synoptic Problem; sources, sequence, and dates of the Gospels and Epistles and the consequent Life of Christ: a study in methodology*, by Robinson Smith, Watts & Co., 1920.

text. Like almost all palimpsests, not all the leaves of the original MS were used by the later scribe, and the leaves (Quire 5, leaf 2, and its conjugate Quire 5, leaf 9) on which Mt. xxviii 7^b—Mk. i 12^a, Mk. v 26^b—Mk. vi 5^a were written are among the seventeen missing leaves. The space is exactly right for the missing text: whether in Mt. xxviii 19 the Trinitarian baptismal formula was given, or whether in Mk. i 11 any title was added in syr. *S* beyond 'Jesus the Messiah', is of course unknown. But that syr. *S* contained a text of Mk. i 11—11 different from that of all other authorities is wholly improbable: there is nothing in the palaeographical facts to suggest it.

Yet Mr Smith refers to the absence of Mk. i 11—11 from syr. *S* again and again (pp. viii, 229 note ^f^a) as if it were a case of real omission from a text, like the absence of Mk. xvi 9—20 from syr. *S* and other authorities.

Again, on p. 45 we read the following foot-note: 'The idea of the application of a Transfiguration to Jesus apparently came (with the phrase, This is my beloved Son) from 2 Peter i 17—8. In the Sinaitic Syriac and in the Curetonian the Transfiguration appears only in Lk., so he may have been the first to adopt the idea.' The facts are that syr. *S* is not extant for Mt. xvi 15^b—xvii 11, but the Curetonian is extant; in Mark ix the Sinaitic Syriac is extant but the Curetonian is not extant (as is the case for almost the whole of Mark). In Mk. ix 2, 3 syr. *S* reads 'he was transfigured before them, and he became gleaming and his clothing became whitened as the snow'—for this reading, see the Old Latin *a n*. Had Mr Smith verified his references, he would have seen that his suggestion that the Transfiguration was absent from any text of the Old Syriac in Matthew or Mark is absolutely gratuitous.

On pp. 71, 72 we find that Mr Smith actually regards syr. *S* as representing a document itself earlier than, and the original of, our Greek Matthew. This is an old, old opinion, originally started (with reference to the Peshitto) by its first editor Widmanstadius in 1555, and afterwards revived in a modified form by Cureton in his edition of the 'Curetonian Syriac'. It is surprising to find in our days any one defending the priority of a text like the Old Syriac (of which the Sinai Palimpsest is one representative) over the Greek. If any one has any lingering doubts on the subject, I would suggest a comparison in the Syriac and the Greek of Mt. xix 12^b, xxvi 50 (ἐφ' ὃ πάρεϊ;), and xxvii 8 (the Field of Blood): it is surely evident in these passages that the Syriac is a mere translation.¹

¹ I would add also Mt. xxii 13, where syr. *S* supports the 'Western' text, which omits all mention of 'binding'. Ordinary external and internal considerations are here very evenly balanced, but what seems to me decisive in favour of a

In the same note that I have quoted from above (p. 49, note ²) Mr Smith derives 'Nazorean' from the Hebrew word Nêts'er (נֶצֶר) a 'Branch'. Unfortunately he twice gives as his authority Zech. vi 12 'Branch shall be his name' (p. 238, note ^{1p}, quoted again p. 264, note ^{1l}). It is a pity for the argument that Zechariah uses the word *Ṣemaḥ* (צִמָּח) not *Nešer*. The fact is that no one is ever called 'Nêts'er' in the Old Testament. Isa. xi 1 says there will be a shoot (*nešer*) from Jesse, but for the man called 'the Branch' the word used is not *nešer* at all.

Another specimen of Mr Smith's method and feeling for language may here be given. On pp. 44 and 52 he is concerned to assert that Luke's wording of the Parable of the Prodigal Son came partly from the Gospel according to the Hebrews, especially the phrase 'riotous living'. 'The phrase "riotous living" (ζῶν ἀσώτως, the latter word not occurring elsewhere in the New Testament) Lk. found (ἀσώτως ἐξηκότος) in the original of the Parable of the Talents (Eusebius *Theophania* 22, quoting *The Gospel acc. to the Hebrews*)—so Mr Robinson Smith, p. 44. And again, p. 52: 'the Greek word for "riotously", "insalvably", found both in the Hebrew Gospel and Lk., is an extremely rare word, occurring, for instance, only here in the New Testament'.

Mr Smith quotes Mai's 22nd fragment quite fairly on p. 252 (note ^{ok}), from which the attentive reader of his book can see that Eusebius is not quoting at all, but only giving a summary of the contents of the Parable in the Hebrew Gospel. 'The Gospel that has come to us in Hebrew characters', says Eusebius, 'has directed the threat not against him that concealed but against him that had lived riotously': he would be a bold man who from this sentence would assert for a certainty that the Greek translation of the 'Gospel in Hebrew characters' accessible to Eusebius or his authority contained the word ἀσώτως at all. And is it such a rare word? It comes in Josephus (*Ant.* xii 4, 8); ἄσωτος occurs in Prov. vii 11, and the noun ἀσωτία occurs three times in the New Testament and twice in the Old.

On page 54 Mr Smith remarks, 'Barabba in the Aramaic means "son of his or the father". It is therefore meaningless unless added to a circumcision name.' This sounds plausible, but is Mr Smith prepared to extend his argument to all the names in Bar, such as Barnabas and Bartholomew and also Bar Cochba? Bar Abba is a curious patronymic, but not more odd than Ahab or the Syriac Aḥudemmeḥ, and in any case was borne by a well-known personage Rabbi Ḥiya Barabba. The habit of speaking of these persons by what

mention of 'binding', in accordance with the text of **N** B and of Westcott and Hort, is the evidence of Enoch x 4 (Δῆσον τὸν Ἀζαὴλ ποσὶν καὶ χερσὶν καὶ βάλε αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ σκότος). It is difficult to think that the imagery of Mt. xxii 13 is independent of this passage.

we may call their surname is possibly Greek, but the case of Barnabas shews that it really was the habit: Luke very properly introduces him to us as Joseph Barnabas and then goes on to speak of him as Barnabas only, but St Paul never mentions his circumcision name. The fact that the robber had the curious name of 'Fathersson' does not make it any more necessary to add the circumcision name also.

I venture to think this preliminary examination of Mr Robinson Smith's standard of scholarship and accuracy is not uncalled for, when so much of his work consists of oracular statements about the dependence of one ancient literary work on another. It is now time to consider the bases of some of the more peculiar positions that he has taken up.

In my opinion, however, the most faulty position, or rather attitude of mind, is one that he shares with a good many other writers on the Gospels. He writes as if the successive Evangelists were so many Scribes or Rabbis, editing, explaining, or (if need be) contradicting their predecessors. Thus (p. 26) 'Mk. (14. 3) says that Mary¹ poured the ointment on Jesus's *head* (an unusual thing to do),² although in Mk. (14. 8) Jesus states that she had anointed his *body* beforehand for the burying. Jn. (12. 3) corrects Mk.'s first statement by saying it was the *feet* of Jesus that were anointed.' Is there anything in the New Testament, or in early Christian history generally, to suggest that early Christian writers really practised this kind of verbal criticism?³ Is it not clear that the writers of our Gospels felt themselves at perfect liberty to tell their stories with whatever verbal changes they thought fit, and further that they had no idea that their work was destined to live side by side with their predecessors? To a certain extent they copy from one another—at least, Matthew and Luke copy from Mark—but this is not proved by their divergences, but by their agreements. However much you may feel at liberty to tell a tale in your own words, it is still easier to copy what is before you, and therefore we find in Matthew and Luke many of the expressions of Mark and still more of the construction of Mark's narrative. But where the Gospels differ they may differ for quite a number of different reasons.

On pp. 27-29 Mr Smith draws up a list of seventeen points in which he thinks it clear that Luke has been influenced by John, not *vice versa*. As an instance take no. (6):—

'Jn. (13. 2): "During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray him. . . ." Lk. (22. 3): "And Satan

¹ How does Mr Smith know the woman's name *from Mark*?

² Yet see Psalm xxiii 5, cxli 5, Lk. vii 46.

³ Mr Robinson Smith (p. 61) 'watches the Epistles, like the Gospels, built up painfully verse by verse taken from existing literature'. If this were the process, the result is miraculous.

entered into Judas who was called Iscariot." The Mk.-Mt. narrative, which Lk. is following, is without any reference to the devil at this point.'

And he suggests in a foot-note that 'Lk. gets the exact phrase from Jn. xiii 27.'

It seems to me, to use the phrase of Matthew Arnold, that it is to consider too curiously to consider so. It is quite true that Mark does not attempt to give a reason for the treachery of Judas, and that Matthew follows him, only hinting that it was in accordance with prophecy (xxvii 9). But is it really improbable that other Christian writers, whether telling the tale with Mark as a basis or otherwise, should independently ascribe it to Satanic agency? Of course, if in their narrative two writers are otherwise very close to one another, either in their language or their peculiar views, such a coincidence is of considerable weight, as shewing their dependence either on each other or on a common source, but Luke and John do not shew such coincidence in language or presentation. A list of seventeen points, none of them in my opinion more cogent than the above, does not make out even a *prima facie* case, when we consider the immense difference of style and spirit between the Gospel according to Luke and the Gospel according to John.

One argument of Mr Smith's to prove that Luke is posterior to Matthew as well as to Mark deserves particular consideration. On pp. 10-11 is a list of twenty-two passages from Mark, part of each of which is reproduced in Matthew and part in Luke. Mr Smith prints the part reproduced in Matthew in heavy type and that by Luke in italics, thus:

1. **At even** *when the sun did set* (Mk. i 32).

18. Simon, *sleepest thou?* **Couldst thou not watch one hour?**

(Mk. xiv 37).

He then argues 'A few of these duplicated phrases (they have never been listed at all completely before)¹ have been used to shew that Mark was the source of both Matthew and Luke; but do they not shew us still more? Do they not shew that Matthew had "first choice", as it were; that he chose before Luke, and that therefore Matthew was written before Luke?'

This sounds like an argument, yet I venture to think there is very little in it, because it fails to take account of the numerous passages where Mark has a full phrase, or pair of phrases, of which the same portion is retained both in Matthew and in Luke. Thus in Mk. ii 27

¹ The full list is Mk. i 32, iii 7, 8, v 24, v 38, v 40, vi 34, ix 12, ix 31, x 29, x 33, 34, x 38, xii 3, xiv 1, xiv 12, xiv 61, xiv 65, xiv 71, xv 42; Mk. i 42, xiv 30, xiv 37, xv 26. In the last four Luke reproduces the first part of the Marcan phrase.

we have the saying that the Sabbath was made for man, and in ii 28 that the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath. Mt. xii 8 only reproduces the latter saying; so does Lk. vi 5. Similarly the sayings about the kingdom divided against itself are introduced by Mk. iii 21 ('He is beside himself') and by iii 22 ('He hath Beelzebub'); only the latter verse is chosen for reproduction in Mt. xii 24 and Lk. xi 15. Similarly in Mk. x 22 we read that the rich man's *countenance fell* and that he went away *sorrowful*: the latter word is represented in Mt. xix 22, Lk. xviii 23, but the former word in neither.¹ If, as Mr Smith suggests, Luke in his choice of words to be rejected from the redundancies of Mark aimed at omitting other phrases than those omitted by Matthew, these passages call for explanation from him.

It would be useless to go through the various passages in Jewish and classical literature alleged by Mr Robinson Smith to be the sources of various passages in the Gospels and Acts. Some of them have been often brought forward before, some are new; some have real weight, some seem to me quite pointless. What I miss is any sort of criterion as to what kind of parallelism constitutes a valid reason for believing that a passage in one work is an actual adaptation from a passage in another. I will conclude with a quotation from the chapter called 'Non-Biblical Sources of Gospels and Acts', in which these alleged sources are arranged in alphabetical order. Between 'Ignatius' and 'Josephus', comes a paragraph on p. 240 labelled 'Inscription (*ca.* 138 A. D.).' It runs as follows:—

'Jn. 9, the healing of the blind man. Compare the inscription on a marble tablet said to be later than 138 A. D., probably fixed on the temple of Asclepius in Rome, given by Dittenberger *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum* (Leipzig (*sic*), 1900) No. 807. 17 f: "To Valerius Aper, a blind soldier, the god revealed that he should go and take blood of a white cock together with honey, and rub them into an eye-salve and anoint his eyes three days. And he received his sight and came and gave thanks publicly to the God." See also Deissmann *Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 132 ff. If the above date is correct and Jn. 9 is dependent upon this inscription, Jn. would be later than 138 A. D., and Lk. later than Jn. but before Marcion, whose date may be as late as 150 A. D. Papias (*ca.* 130) mentions Mk. and Mt., but not Lk., and not at all certainly Jn. The "and" construction in the above passage and Jn. is very marked.'

Certainly there is much virtue in an 'if'.

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¹ Of these passages I have noted Mk. i 41, ii 19, 27, iii 21, iv 39, v 39, x 14, 21, 22, xi 10^a, 16, xiv 20, and the list might be considerably extended.