

AUTHENTICITY OF THE GOSPELS.

An interesting paper on the above subject was read at a meeting of the Wanganui Freethought Association in August. The paper showed that, taking the Gospels in their order, the earliest testimony we have of the authorship of Matthew is in the first half of the second century. Papias, then Bishop of Hieropolis in Phrygia says:—"Matthew noted down in the Hebrew language the speeches of the Lord, and every one interpreted them as well as he could." Later writers also assert that Matthew wrote in Hebrew, that is, in the Aramaic dialect of the time, and Hieronymus adds—"It is not known who translated this Gospel, originally written in Hebrew, into Greek." Papias says "speeches of Our Lord," and many Bible critics infer from this that the translator or translators added the miraculous and historical parts. That there were several Greek versions, seems to be admitted by Papias when he says "everyone interpreted them as well as he could," and indeed several quotations of the early fathers either differ materially from our Matthew or are entirely unknown to him. Some Hebrew scholars go further than this, and boldly state that, from the structure of its language, our Matthew must have been composed originally in Greek, and not translated from the Hebrew at all.

Papias bears testimony also for Mark. He says:—"It was a tradition of John the Presbyter, that Mark, the author of the second Gospel, was the interpreter of Peter, and had not himself been attendant on the Lord, but had recorded accurately as far as he remembered, but not in order, the speeches and lectures of Peter."

Of the authorship of Luke we have no external evidence of so old a date, but it has a noticeable testimony to itself in its preface. From this we see that a considerable evangelical literature was in existence, to which he referred in a critical point of view; and that he does not claim any exclusive source, like the teaching of an Apostle, but that he has "followed up and enquired into all things accurately from the first," which does not sound like the language of the companion of an Apostle, though the author is generally considered as such.

Coming to John, we are met by the startling fact of the complete silence of Papias concerning this Gospel. This is the more remarkable, as he not only expressly assures us that he eagerly investigated the traditions about John, but, as Bishop of Asia Minor, and an acquaintance of Polycarp, the disciple of John, might naturally have some accurate information about the Apostle, who passed his last years in Ephesus. From this it is evident that Papias was not acquainted with the Gospel of John, and from the silence also of some of the later fathers, we are driven to the conclusion that this Gospel was not known in the Church until the latter half of the second century. Of this much, though, we may be certain, that towards the end of the second century after Jesus the same four Gospels as we now have them were recognised in the Church, and quoted as the writings of the Apostles, and disciples of the Apostles, whose names they bear, by Irenæus in Gaul, Clement in Alexandria, and Tertullian in Carthage, though there were a number of other Gospels sometimes appealed to by orthodox teachers; and, indeed, it was about 350 years after the death of Jesus that the Church collected these different writings, and at the famous Council of Nice by vote rejected some, deemed some doubtful or apocryphal, and accepted as inspired the collection now bearing the title of the New Testament. At an early age there were men who doubted the authenticity of this Testament, accusing the Christians with re-modelling and re-coining portions of the original writings, filling them with absurdities and lies. Quarrels also arose amongst the early Christian sects. The Manicheans, who formed a very numerous sect at the commencement of Christianity, rejected as false all the New Testament, and shewed other writings quite different, which they gave as authentic. The Valentinians and several other sects accused the Scriptures of being filled with imperfections, errors, and contradictions.

From the above we see that if Matthew (of which we have no proof) wrote the original Aramaic or Hebrew Gospel, still our present text, by the admission of its advocates, is an unauthorised translation by some unknown hand, though denied even this merit by many learned Hebrew scholars. In Mark putting the most favorable construction on the evidence—the author details from memory only, as well as he is able, the conversations and lectures of Peter (though Bible critics by no means admit

this)—Luke, by his own admission, is simply a collector of traditions.

In John we can find no reliable evidence whatsoever that he is the author, or, indeed, that it was written before the latter half of the second century; and this is the more remarkable when we consider how much the Church depends on the authenticity of this Gospel, for it is in John, and and John alone, that Jesus claims an equality with God, in such sentences as "I and my father are one," "he that hath seen me hath seen my father," etc.

The paper then gave briefly the result of the Bible criticisms of the present century, and more especially of the German school of critics, who, finding the external evidence either wanting or unreliable, devoted themselves to a searching examination of the structure and language of the Gospels themselves. The result of this criticism is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels, as, though full of inconsistencies and contradictions, there is a certain amount of agreement running through them, as opposed to John, which seems to point to a common source, or sources, from which the writers, whoever they were, drew. Again, these critics, bearing in mind that the early Church was divided into opposing camps—one the Judavim, or Conservative, led by Peter, James, and John, and the other the Missionary, or Proselytizing, with the great Gentile preacher, Paul, at its head—have in the discrepancies and contradictions of these first three Gospels, traced this contention, and arrived at an approximate idea of the writers' views and the time of production.

After giving several instances from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, illustrating the influence on the writers of this schism in the early Church, the paper stated that, in dealing with John, modern criticism has announced as one of its most certain results that it is impossible that the same author can have written this Gospel and the Revelations, the latter being the most Jewish book in the New Testament, and the former having outgrown Judaism more than even Paul; and that it is evident, from an examination of its internal structure and doctrines, that it is a production of the Alexandrian Logos, and first appeared in the latter half of the second century, born of that evolution in religion which is going on at the present day.

The paper concluded by expressing surprise that so stupendous an infringement of the laws of nature should rest on so weak a foundation, and that if on such evidence a case were brought before one of our English Judges, he would dismiss it on its merits, and not insult the jury by sending it before them.

HOLD THE FLAG.

TUNE—"HOLD THE FORT."

Hark! the tramp of Freedom ringing,
Through the battle's crash!
Let your joyous shout of "Forward"!
Ready answer flash.

CHORUS—Hold the flag of Freedom flying,
Through the troubled night;
Round the crimson banner rally,
Children of the light!

Boldly follow where she guideth,
Ever take her part;
Goddess of your worship is she,
Monarch of your heart.

CHORUS—Hold the flag, etc.

Be your daily work an offering
Laid upon her shrine;
Never let her blush to own you,
Make your life sublime.

CHORUS—Hold the flag, etc.

Be your heart a holy altar
Lit with living flame,
Aspiration's incense rising
To her sacred name.

CHORUS—Hold the flag, etc.

Gladly to her glorious service
Dedicate each breath;
If you cannot win her living,
Conquer her by death.

CHORUS—Hold the flag, etc.

Annie Besant.

"A pretty little fairy, who lives in Washington and who is very fond of having Bible stories read to her, ran to her mamma the other day and said, eagerly: "Oh! mamma, please read me that pretty story again about little Moses with the bulls rushing after him!"