Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Gospel of Matthew

Meyer Gustav
CRITICAL AND EXEGETICAL
HAND-BOOK
TO THE
GOSPEL OF MATTHEW.

BY
HEINRICH AUGUST WILHELM MEYER, Th. D.,
UBERCONSISTORIALRATH, HANNOVER.

TRANSLATED FROM THE SIXTH EDITION OF THE GERMAN BY
REV. PETER CHRISTIE.

THE TRANSLATION REVISED AND EDITED BY
FREDERICK CROMBIE, D.D., and WILLIAM STEWART, D.D.,
PROFESSOR OF
BIBLICAL CRITICISM,
ST. MARY'S COLLEGE, ST. ANDREWS.

AND

PROFESSOR OF
BIBLICAL CRITICISM
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW.

WITH A PREFACE AND SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES TO THE AMERICAN EDITION BY
GEORGE R. CROOKS, D.D.,
PROFESSOR IN DREW THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, MADISON, N. J.

FUNK & WAGNALLS
NEW YORK 1884.
10 AND 12 DRY STREET
LONDON 44 FLEET STREET
All Rights Reserved
Entered, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1884,

By FUNK & WAGNALLS,

In the Office of the Librarian of Congress, at Washington, D.C.
PREFACE BY THE AMERICAN EDITOR.

When we come to the gospel of Matthew we stand upon the threshold of that history which more than any other has wrought a permanent change in the thoughts and habits of mankind. In its effects upon the world it stands apart from all other histories ever written. Whatever is precious and hopeful in modern civilization is derived directly from it; we cannot, therefore, as members of Christian society, approach it without certain prepossessions in its favor. Most wisely are we, therefore, called upon by Neander, in entering upon the study of the gospels, to reject the indifference of science. In the investigation of truth all depends upon the spirit in which we work. And as the gospels are the very breath of life to us, we can only investigate them aright when we acknowledge that our intellectual and moral being is continually nourished by them. To deny the possibility of the manifestations of the supernatural, to carp at or to belittle such manifestations as they are made known to us in God's word, are obvious disqualifications for the study of revealed truth. The one prepossession with which we should approach the study of the gospels is, that "Jesus Christ is the Son of God in a sense which cannot be predicated of any human being—the perfect image of the personal God in the form of that humanity that was estranged from Him; that in Him the source of the divine life itself in humanity appeared; that by Him the idea of humanity was realized." 1

Of this prepossession, Neander says most eloquently, "It is one at whose touch of power the dry bones of the old world sprang up in all the vigor of a new creation. It gave birth to all that culture (the modern as distinguished from the ancient) from which the Germanic nations received their peculiar intellectual life, and from which the emancipation of the mind, grown too strong for its bonds, was developed in the Reformation. It is the very root and ground of our modern civilization; and the latter, even in its attempts to separate from that root, must rest upon it. Indeed, should such attempts succeed, it must dissolve into its original elements, and assume an entirely new form." 2

1 Neander, Life of Christ, Amer. Ed., p. 3.
2 Ibid.
I think, therefore, that before we let ourselves be lost in the perplexities of historical detail, which from the lack of necessary information we can never wholly unravel, we should meditate much upon the higher harmony of the gospel collection, by which the four narratives are brought into perfect accord. Whether we call Matthew’s gospel Jewish and Luke’s Gentile, or whether we contrast Matthew’s as the gospel of the body, with John’s as the gospel of the spirit, or whether we dwell on Mark’s almost Roman compression of style, we perceive no blur or indistinctness in the image given us of Jesus Christ. We see Him on several sides, but the identity of the representation is perfect. In each and all He is the same sympathetic helper of men, has the same clear vision of His mission on earth, gives the same account of His origin and the same foretokening of His end, dies the same death, and has the same resurrection. There is no jar, no dissonance in the stories told by the evangelists. Whatever the discrepancies in subordinate points, the narrative of no one of them could have been the creation of the age in which they lived. They were incapable of conceiving or of inventing the Messiah whom they describe. This sense of the spiritual harmony of the gospels will guard us against ascribing difficulties which we cannot solve to blundering on the part of the evangelists, or to legends which they have credulously accepted as true, an error into which Dr. Meyer, despite his great exegetical sagacity, sometimes falls. One cannot but wish that modesty should be shown in dealing with a history which, though witnessed to by the ages, is nearly two thousand years old, for the full explication of whose minutiae a thousand collateral facts long since faded from the knowledge of men are needed. “We do not,” says Ebrard, “enter upon the evangelical history with spyglass in hand, to seek our own credit, by essaying to disclose ever fresh instances of what is contradictory, foolish, or ridiculous, but with the faithful, clear, and open eye of him who joyfully recognizes the good, the beautiful, the noble, wheresoever he finds it, and on that account finds it with joy, and never lays aside his favorable prepossession till he is persuaded of the contrary. We give ourselves up to the plastic influence of the gospels, live in them, and at the same time secure to ourselves, while we thus act in the spirit of making all our own, a deeper insight into the unity, beauty, and depth of the Evangelical History.”

An example of the hypercritical spirit which is employed upon the writings of the evangelists, as upon no other historical documents, is the objection made to the authenticity of Matthew’s gospel, because it

---

1 Kritik der Evangelischen Geschichte. Quoted by Ellicott, Life of Christ, p. 23, note.
lacks graphic power. We are told that an eye-witness would have had a more vivid apprehension of events and would have put more life into his account of them. Did the critics who urge this ever consider that the vivacity of a witness is not reckoned an element of credibility in a court of law? If witnesses were to be believed only as they were vivacious, the administration of justice would come to a stand-still. Many an examiner in court has found clear, consistent truth in a witness who was as precise as the multiplication table. And if we were to pronounce written documents spurious on the ground of a lack of vivacity, we should reject some of the most valuable materials of history. Hansard is not very graphic, but it contains the sum and substance of the proceedings of the English Parliament, in the period covered. One of the most important works in American Ecclesiastical history is the journal of Francis Asbury, the first Methodist Bishop; it is almost as dry as Euclid, but is as veracious as if delivered under oath. Vivacity and veracity are not necessarily correlated. Tried by the tests of common sense, this objection to the authenticity of Matthew’s gospel seems too absurd for serious refutation. And yet it is one of a large class of cavils which do more credit to the ingenuity than to the candor of their authors. Davidson thinks that the nature of Matthew’s occupation was unfavorable to lively narrative: “As a collector of taxes, we should not expect much of the picturesque or imaginative from his pen. Accountants are not ordinarily possessed of the best talent for description. They deal in the exact and formal, in accuracy of detail, or in grouping truth of what is analogous.” Though we do not place much value on this explanation, it may have weight with some. The want of necessary connection between vividness and truthfulness is, we conceive, a sufficient answer.

Dr. Meyer’s treatment of Matthew is freer than will be acceptable to many American Christians. Especially will his theory of the origin of this gospel encounter opposition, inasmuch as it leaves the apostolicity of the Hebrew original, from which our Greek Matthew was made, in doubt. Resting upon the supposed testimony of Papias to that effect, he holds that Matthew composed a digest of the sayings of Christ, but yet not a proper gospel history. This collection of Hebrew sayings gathered by Matthew was gradually expanded through the interweaving of the historical facts of the life of Christ at the hands of others. Matthew is therefore responsible only for those discourses of Jesus which are to be found in his gospel; from whom we have derived the interwoven history no one can tell. This theory is convenient for Dr. Meyer, because it enables him to reject some portions of our first gospel as legendary, and other portions as contradictory of John. Such
a bias of opinion should lead us to weigh all the more cautiously the reasoning on which the theory rests. The general testimony of antiquity is against it; Dr. Meyer refers it to Schleiermacher, who gave a new rendering of the words of Papias, quoted by Eusebius. The words of Papias on this point are: Ματθαίος μὲν οὖν Ἑβαΐδα διωλέως ὁ λόγιμος συνεταξάμενος, which Dr. Meyer makes to mean that Matthew arranged the sayings of Jesus, in the Hebrew. It is, however, well urged by Davidson that τὰ λόγια, neither in its New Testament nor its subsequent use, is limited to the sayings or discourses of any one. In Romans iii. 2, Hebrews v. 12, and 1 Peter iv. 11, it is used of the entire Old Testament, the history of course inclusive. Hence, says Cremer, "it is not like ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ, "the word of God," that which God has to say, but the term to denote the historical (O. T.) manifestation of this." Moreover, in the context of the passage cited from Papias, where he speaks of Mark, he uses τὰ λόγια as descriptive of our second gospel. Davidson thus puts the argument: "In speaking of Mark's gospel, it is related that the evangelist did not write in regular order (ταξιαδί) the things spoken or done by Christ (τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ λεξεῖντα ἡ πραγματεύει), to which it is immediately subjoined, that Peter gave Mark such instruction as was necessary, but not as a connected history of our Lord's discourses (οὕτως ὁ πρότερον τῶν Κυριακῶν ποιοῦμενος λόγιων). Here τὰ Κυριακὰ λόγια is explained by τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ πραγματεύει ἡ λεξεῖντα, both being used synonymously in relation to the contents of Mark's gospel."² It is very clear that in this passage the discourses are not differentiated from the history; the one term λόγια is used of both.³

Still further, it was the conviction of the apostles that the "life" of their Master "was the light of men," and they would not therefore be likely to separate His words from His deeds. To show what He was was as important to their purpose as to rehearse what He said. Luke tells Theophilus that his gospel was an account of all that Jesus "began both to do and to teach." John closes his account saying "that there were many other things that Jesus did," proving that full as is his gospel of the discourses of our Lord, the acts of Jesus are in his mind an essential

---

¹ See page 3 seq.
³ Dr. Meyer argues that the words οἷς ὤσπερ συνταξαίν τῶν Κυριακῶν ποιοῦμενος λόγιων ["not as though he were making a methodical digest of the discourses of the Lord"] are not the equivalents of τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ λεξεῖντα ἡ πραγματεύει ["the things said or done by Christ"], but Papias is in both clauses speaking of the same subject; the difference is merely in the phrasing of his thought.
part of the record. Matthew's purpose also of exhibiting the fulfilment of prophecy in the life of his Master would compel the recording of the working and suffering of Jesus for men in their proper connection with His sayings. To show that Jesus was the expected Messiah, it was indispensable that Matthew should depict Him moving through the cycle of labors and sufferings which had been foretold by the prophets. "Who shall undertake," asks Davidson very pertinently, "to separate the mere λόγια from the facts and circumstances with which they are surrounded? The attempt has never been seriously made, and we venture to affirm that it is practically impossible. Theorists may pronounce it an easy thing; but the different materials of the gospel are so interlaced that they will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate the truth of their opinion by fairly dividing what they declare to be practicable." 1

A natural sequence of this theory of Schleiermacher, adopted by Dr. Meyer, is the supposition that Mark's is, in the order of time, the first gospel, and that upon it the legendary aceretions of Matthew and Luke have grown. Under this supposition the testimony of antiquity that Matthew wrote first is limited to the λόγια above described; and as this collection of Christ's discourses has wholly disappeared, and as the complete Hebrew gospel of Matthew was a subsequent growth out of this, a plausible claim may be made for Mark in point of time. But if the theory that the first Matthew was a bare collection of Christ's discourses falls, an important support of the claim of the priority of Mark falls with it. The testimony of antiquity must then be applied with all its evidential power to the complete Hebrew gospel of Matthew, and the testimony of antiquity is that he wrote first. This support being thus taken away from Dr. Meyer's supposition, it might very properly be dismissed; but it may be well to show other reasons for its untenableness.

In the first place, it bears evident marks of a controlling bias of opinion. Dr. Meyer wishes, as we have already said, to dispose of certain parts of Matthew as legendary. Thus he writes: "With this assumption that Mark is the oldest of the synoptics, the distinctive internal character of this gospel is quite in harmony—the omission of all preliminary histories, the beginning with the appearance of the Baptist, the as yet altogether undeveloped narrative of the Temptation, the freedom from legendary insertions in the history of the Passion which are found in Matthew, and especially the original stamp of direct liveliness and picturesque clearness of style and description." 2 The obvious utility

1 Introduction to New Testament, p. 68.
2 Condensed from pp. 28, 29.
of this supposition of the priority of Mark, for the effectual disposing of
certain portions of Matthew, must for us at least break the force of Dr.
Meyer’s arguments. Moreover, in the narrative of the Temptation, Mark
shows all the evidences of legend, if legend there be. He says, “And
straightway the Spirit driveth him forth into the wilderness. And he was
in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and he was with the wild
beasts; and the angels ministered unto him” (chap. i. 12, 13, R. V.).
Wherein the account of Matthew differs from this, except in greater
fulness of detail, it is difficult to see. The same extraordinary superna-
tural agencies are to be found in both; and we may add that it was
humanly impossible for any Jew to invent the additional circumstances
of the Temptation given us by Matthew.

In the second place, we have reason to be distrustful of internal
criticism where it is unsupported by external evidence. No better
element of the futility of such criticism is needed than Dr. Meyer’s
own account of the relationship of the first three gospels to each
other. (See his Introduction, pp. 19–31.) Whether the supposi-
tion be taken that all the three are from a common original, or the sup-
position that each evangelist made use of the others, the results of
such attempts to trace the derivation of the three are simply chaotic.
Dr. Meyer himself admits that the schemes of derivation which have
been framed upon the supposition of a common written original are
worthy of note only as evidences of inventive conjecture. No more can
be said, however, for his own theory, or the theories of others, which
undertake to show, apart from external testimony, the order in time of
the synoptical gospels, and the use made by each, of his predecessors.
Of the six arrangements of the order of these evangelists cited by him,
every one has the sanction of great names, and each, as far as it is sup-
ported by internal criticism, is as valid as the rest. We may for this
second reason also, as well as for the reason of the contradictory testi-
mony of antiquity, set aside Dr. Meyer’s supposition that Mark’s gospel
is the first in the order of time, and that Matthew and Luke are fuller
in numerous details by reason of legendary additions to Mark’s report.

Inasmuch as Dr. Meyer’s solution of the relation of the synoptists to
each other appears so radically defective, it may not be amiss to pur-
sue the subject a little further. Its difficulties are freely admitted.
Nor can we at the best reach any more than conjectural conclusions.
The objections made by Alford to the supposition that the evangelists
copied from each other seem to be conclusive. “It is inconceivable,”
says he, “that one writer, borrowing from another matter confessedly
of the very first importance, in good faith and with approval, should alter
his diction so singularly and capriciously as on this hypothesis we find the