

A BURIED TREASURE IN THE GOSPELS

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I

THE Synoptic Gospels record an event in the earthly life of our Lord which was evidently regarded as of great importance by the Holy Spirit, since He caused it to be included three times over in the Scriptures (Matt. 19: 16-22; Mark 10: 17-22; Luke 18: 18-23). The authors concur in recording the general story, each adding a significant detail to complete, or nearly so, the recital of the incident.

All say that as Jesus was on His way for the last time from Galilee to Jerusalem, a man came to Jesus asking what he should do in order to inherit eternal life. The repartee initiated between them at that moment rather seems to give the reader a hint of some previous acquaintance, since the Lord's reply was a challenge which is not taken up, as if the essential deity of the Lord Jesus is something for which the man is unable to find a place in his mind. Did they know one another? Subsequent comment suggests this to the present writer.

Matthew states that the man was quite young, Luke that he was one of the rulers, and Mark some graphic details that betoken the words of an eye-witness, namely, that in the first place, he came running and kneeling to the Master.

All agree about the immediate result of the interview, a situation brought about by the reluctance of the young man to divest himself of his earthly possessions, give them away to the poor, and take up the cross and follow Jesus, who knew full well whither He was going. The young man "went away very sorrowful, for he was very rich".

In the second place, Mark goes on to relate an astonishing, intimate detail betokening again the close observance of an eye-witness of the scene. He writes (verse 21): "Then Jesus, beholding him, loved him". But it is curious that he does not name the man, and still stranger that we have failed to suspect a deep significance in

this omission, when we reflect how many others who were interviewed were named. Perhaps he was so well known as not to require identification when the Gospels were first used. Can we trace him, at these distant times of ours?

Anonymity, of course, in the Gospels is not confined, in the case of persons important to the story, to the rich young ruler. But though nameless then, he was of the greatest possible interest to the Lord, for at the close of the interview Jesus, looking round about Him (we should do well to study all those recorded "looks" of the Lord) said to His disciples: "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!" And the disciples, it is added, "were astonished at His words". In fact, they were astonished out of measure, till Jesus, looking upon them (those words again!) said: "With men it is impossible, but not with God: with God all things are possible". Even the salvation of the rich young ruler? The Scripture at this point is silent concerning him, but we may surely take the words of our Lord as prophetic in this respect. Perhaps he joined the little company of whom we read in John 12: 42: "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on Him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue". If his name was known in the first century, then an important tradition has been either lost or replaced.

But love begets love—especially, may we not joyfully say, a Saviour's love, and the poor rich man's sorrow was genuine.

Jesus knew that He had many secret disciples, and He loved and cared for them all, as we learn from His prayer in John 17.

How sadly they failed to realize what lay before Him on that last, momentous journey—even the Twelve, those closest to Him whom He had, after a whole night of prayer, appointed to be with Him. Not one of the Twelve loved Him enough to take His mangled body from the cross of shame and do for Him as the Law required.

Even on the way to the city, Salome and her two sons James and John come to Him asking an extraordinary favour. So excited are they about their plan that (putting the accounts in Matt. 20 and Mark 10 together) they all speak at once, asking for the impossible. The two brothers had been rebuked before, and reminded of their ignorance about the spiritual nature of their calling, but this new event infuriated the other disciples till Jesus calmed them and instructed them about serving one another.

II

But in the Upper Room it became evident that the seeds of evil had been sown, and now they are all squabbling as to who should be the greatest, and no exception is made of the "Sons of Thunder". Yet one of them is supposed to be the disciple whom Jesus loved, though he is not named—another anonymity.

Jesus took the Twelve in hand again. This He did on the arrival of supper (note the difference from A.V.), when the servants would bring in the water, basins and towels for the washing of the guests' feet. Jesus takes the implements from them, stripping Himself and performing the menial task Himself.

But, surely, the son of thunder had not been again asserting his claim while he reclined on Jesus' bosom? Perhaps in his anonymity this particular disciple has been incorrectly identified? More likely is it, we think, that the host of Jesus and the Twelve was the one whom Peter requested to inquire who should betray Him. We can hardly place John in this seat of honour after his so recent disturbance of the peace, without paying too much respect to a tradition perhaps not as reliable as has been thought.

The description "disciple" is not synonymous, or need not be, with the definite title "apostle".

There are one or two special features connected with this scene in the Upper Room. Its locality was kept secret, being the subject of a special sign, and may have been so out of regard for the position of His host as a secret disciple of great wealth, as indicated by the expression "a large upper room *furnished*", which was to be made ready. Its identity was the subject of a peculiar sign—a *man* carrying a pitcher of water in a land where this was the customary task of the woman. Was it the water with which our Lord washed His disciples' feet? And did the wealthy host provide the cup which Jesus "received"? At least we may comfortably assume that it was he who leaned on Jesus' breast at the meal.

But who is that disciple who was known to the high priest, and went in with Jesus into the palace of the high priest, and has universally been identified, as the beloved disciple, with John the Apostle? This man, striding authoritatively past the guards, ordering them about as to whom (i.e. to Peter) should be accorded the privilege of admission to the palace, and himself inviolate from questioning, moving with such aplomb as led Peter (who had previously fled with the rest from the scene of the arrest) to follow—this man is no Galilæan fisherman, already outlawed, against whom the high priest would have shown the most venomous hatred! What? The "ignorant and unlearned" disciple on visiting terms, whether front-

door or back-door, with Annas and Caiaphas? Never! Acts 4: 13 is, moreover, decisive on this point. Perhaps our un-named man is an honourable counsellor, a secret disciple, yet one who has the right to be where he is in the palace.

It is this same man whom we find at the cross and to whom Jesus so tenderly committed the care of His mother. We hardly think, again, that he has been hitherto correctly identified, for John's own mother was "in the offing". Moreover, it looks as though that disciple took her to his own home. John may have had a temporary lodging nearby, but surely, not a home—and with his own mother as well in the house! We do not think Jesus would have put such a strain on human nature. It seems that the father Zebedee had died, from the description of Salome as the mother of Zebedee's children. Two mistresses of one house? Poor John! Is there not some suspicion as to the reliability of this tradition, early as it has been thought to be?

We come now to a disciple who is not anonymous and is most boldly heralded by all four gospels, in spite of some slight aura of mystery which still surrounds him.

Why is he so placarded? And how did he know that Jesus was "dead already"? Did he hear those last words, and was he the one who bore witness to the wondrous sight when our Lord's side was so callously pierced?

The account of Joseph of Arimathea reads like an official report, or extensive and perhaps free quotations from an official report. This would be quite in place in view of the special circumstances, for very likely Joseph was called to defend himself before his council in regard to his recalcitrancy over the condemnation of Jesus, and the official dealings with Pilate.

This man comes on the scene as evening falls, a secret disciple, a rich man, a member of the Sanhedrin and one influential also with the Romans. His action at Calvary was brave, as was also that of his friend Nicodemus, and they, though they may still have feared exposure, showed wonderful love towards Him who had so loved them.

Perhaps Joseph did not think of himself as fulfilling the part of the prophecy of Isa. 53, nor was he yet fit for the Kingdom. True, he probably used his wealth, position and power in sheltering and safeguarding a considerable collection of the disciples, but he had not yet learned that the kingdom of heaven is not in meat and drink. But to him—and not to one of the Twelve—was given the privilege of providing the stage for the greatest event in the history of the world.

Joseph's name, therefore, is mentioned at that point in the divine narrative at which this tremendous significance can be appreciated, in order that the suffering Servant of Jehovah might make his grave . . . with the rich in his death, forming the complement to the mention of the thieves' crucifixion with Him. Though we think he had been at the cross before Jesus died, withholding of his full name and description until this moment pin-points this feature. His action was to provide, in view of all that the Lord had said concerning His death and resurrection, the most necessary attestation, with unimpeachable human evidence, of the fact upon which the subsequent preaching of the Gospel depended, namely, "Jesus and the Resurrection". An almost unbelievable privilege.

However, to return to our study of anonymity, another instance of which occurs on the Resurrection morning, when once more we meet "the other disciple, whom Jesus loved". Who was he?

Picture the scene so graphically sketched in the Gospel of John. What utter dismay had filled the hearts of the disciples and of all those who waited for the kingdom of God, at the frightful reversal of the fortunes of the Preacher, whose so recent arrest and death was their chief pre-occupation.

Mary Magdalene, at the tomb while it was still dark on the Resurrection morning, receives a dreadful shock. She runs away in alarm and finds Peter, and the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and cries out "They have taken away the Lord out of the grave, and we know not where they have laid him!" They are too shocked to reply, perhaps, for as yet they knew not the Scriptures that He must rise from the dead. Off goes the other disciple, at a fast trot, followed as best he can by Peter, and they find the guards gone, the stone rolled away and the body of Jesus not there. "The other disciple did outrun Peter."

This reminds one of another occasion on which a man came running, whose athletic powers were in evidence. And of each of these men it is said that Jesus loved him. Who was he? If we do not at once wish to answer this question, can we, at any rate, find a reason for his haste and very evident concern? Yes, if the tomb which had been "violated" *was his!*

If so, we have our man, and how luminous the record now becomes, for we have examined the position in which John the Apostle would have been placed had he occupied the various parts which the beloved disciple was called upon to play. In all these situations we have had a feeling of his unsuitability, yet in every one of the circumstances we have so far examined, Joseph of Arimathea could fulfil every requirement perfectly and consistently,

forming an irresistible, though surprising, conclusion.

In addition, Joseph fits very well into the framework of the rich young ruler, of whom it is recorded that "Jesus beholding him loved him", and this was so evident that we may well believe he too received a nickname ever afterwards in the Gospel narrative to hold it.

Consider afresh the circumstances and deeds of this young man, and his dignity: (a) Fulfilment of prophecy (e.g., Isaiah 53: 9). (b) He was one of the disciples. (c) He was a member of the Sanhedrim and as such would, as we have seen, be called to give a report of his recalcitrancy over the condemnation of Jesus. (d) His greatness in this respect ("honourable"), however, together with his wealth, gave him a certain immunity from harm, and his influence with the Romans was such as to make Pilate readily available to him—even courteous to him, we would say. He was, perhaps, a decurion and therefore prominent also in the Gentile world.

By virtue of Joseph's position of universal respect and his ascendancy over both Jews and Romans, he was particularly qualified for his special service, though once the secret of his faith was out, a feeling of haste creeps into the narrative. The fanatical hatred of Caiaphas and the rulers against not only Jesus but against His disciples placed the latter in constant danger from which hitherto the Master had shielded them, and Joseph was in a position to continue this care. From the fact that he had recently provided himself with a tomb just outside the walls of the city, it is probable that his main residence was in Jerusalem and on a scale consistent with his means and position. It was surely natural, therefore, that Jesus on the cross should commit His sorrowing and suffering mother into the safe keeping of Joseph of Arimathea. We may surmise that he took advantage of his mansion to shelter many other disciples.

No doubt, at Pentecost, the Spirit baptized Joseph also, and we can imagine how the words of Jesus to him some few weeks ago would now return with their full import, so that he knew what still remained for him to do, as the Master had said.

III

Let Luke take up the story in his second book, following the new text of Nestlé. He has been telling us, for the second time, about the effect of the Gospel in changing the attitude of the disciples about their personal property, among whom was one who had used his resources for the good of apostles to such an extent that he had earned an endearing name somewhat similar to his

former one. They called him "Son of Consolation", or Barnabas, and under this name (instead of "Joseph") we continue to read of him. To obtain such a reputation must have entailed the performance of some striking services over a considerable time, and hardly for the one act of consecration in which he at last obeyed the injunction of the Master and laid down his wealth in humility at the apostles' feet.

The information as to Joseph being a Levite is interesting, as it explains his friendship with Nicodemus, undoubtedly also a Levite ("Art thou the teacher in Israel, and knowest not these things?"—the identification is perfect and traditional, for the Levites were always regarded as the teachers). It should be noted that although a priest must be a Levite, the reverse is not necessarily true.

It is curious how certain natural traits persist. For instance, the blow to the prestige of the rich young ruler, and his timidity as to discipleship, were paralleled much later by his attitude about eating with the Gentiles—"Barnabas of all people", Paul is in effect saying about his being carried away by the Judaizers—sensitive still to his reputation.

Doubtless when Joseph was serving on the Council he had come into close (not to say hostile) contact with another young man named Saul, and we do not know how far the influence of such an association (maybe, too, at the feet of Gamaliel) went towards the subsequent conversion of the Apostle to the Gentiles. From the way Joseph accepted the reality of his conversion we feel he must have known something of what was going on in Saul's mind both before and after the death of Stephen. The way he took in Saul (who was outlawed by the Jews and both feared and rejected by the believers), acting lovingly as his protector and sponsor, is quite in character with the way in which Joseph had cared for the body of the outlawed and crucified Saviour. It is, moreover, a comfort to glean from a later reference to Barnabas by Paul that they still maintained Christian brotherly relationship even after their difference of judgment concerning Mark.¹ Joseph's own association with Cyprus induced him to travel thither, and from what we know of rich Jewish merchants, they had contacts all along the Mediterranean and the pair may even have visited Peter in Egyptian Babylon, from which the latter writes, as he says in his epistle.

If we have rightly interpreted the hints given us in the sacred record, the life of Joseph appears as a great arch with Calvary as its keystone and supported at each side by two pillars: (1) The

¹ Was Joseph-Barnabas "the brother whose praise in the gospel was spread over all the churches"?

words of our Lord, "One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me"; (2) "And Joseph, who by the apostles was nicknamed 'Son of Consolation' . . . having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet".

If we would know something of what took place in his unhappy mind during his weeks of uncertainty until his final surrender, we have only to look within ourselves, or study Job. But is it not remarkable that none of those men, whom Jesus after a night of prayer chose to be with Him, could be found to perform the last human service to Him, and that it was left to the two men who once concealed their faith for fear of the Jews!

IV

But we have not yet had our last interview with the disciple whom Jesus loved. Perhaps it will prove to be the most exciting.

Before considering this, however, let us reflect for a moment on the manner in which many, or all, of the New Testament documents were written. They were not originally the formal treatises written in stately English within the beautiful bindings we possess today, collectively termed "The New Testament". They were rather the *al fresco* products of some immediate necessity, usually written in the vernacular with apostolic authority, to fellow-disciples at some other locality. In the case of the letters, this is naturally plainly discernible: after the main message was finished, friends would take advantage of the outgoing post to send messages and greetings to those known and dear to them in the places for which the document was intended.²

Now let us turn to the fourth Gospel. Reading the last two verses of chapter 20, we realize that we have come to an expected end; it is as if a Euclid, having with a master mind worked through a magnificent theorem, should have laid down his pen with a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction that, through God's Holy Spirit bringing the logic to life, future generations of saved souls would be able to write "Q.E.D."—"Life through His Name" triumphantly demonstrated.

And now comes chapter 21, with a fresh impulse, a short section packed with incidents as facts come tumbling over one another into the memory of the writer. Then, suddenly, we come to verse

² See, for instance, Rom. 16, especially verse 22: "I, Tertius, who wrote this epistle, salute you in the Lord", where the Christian amanuensis himself is permitted to send greetings in his own name.

20, with its evident reference to an event long past in the memory of "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (we remember how "Jesus, beholding him, loved him"). And then, in verse 24: "This is the disciple who is testifying these things *and wrote these things*".

We take this verse then as the signature of the amanuensis, and as every Jew was compelled to learn a trade—e.g., Jesus the carpenter, Paul the tent-maker or leather-worker, what better trade for the learned Joseph than that of one wielding the pen of a ready writer?

Did, then, statesman and lowly fisherman in fact gloriously collaborate in the production of this Gospel, issued late in the first century A.D., supported by the approval of the elders, as we read in verse 24, "And we know that his testimony is true"? Joseph may also, besides doing the actual writing of the Gospel narrative, have supplied many of the details from his personal experience, of which he had long been testifying. Where, Scripture does not reveal, but many traditions (albeit late and of unproved authority) link him with Philip in the evangelization of the whole Mediterranean sea-board, even to distant Marseilles and far-distant Britain. The passage appended to the Gospel appears to contain a warning of his own decease, which traditionally took place two years later, in A.D. 82, after he had given his all in the service of his Lord.

If our work in the present thesis is valid, it could mean that the foundation of the Glastonbury story, almost wholly rejected by scholars, may derive from an extremely ancient tradition which had been lost sight of by the church at large. If, moreover, anyone wishes to suggest that Joseph was alone in the composition of the Gospel and that "we" in 21: 24 denotes apostolic authority, we should have no valid objection to offer.

The great thing is, not "who wrote the Gospel", but the fact that through someone's labours towards the end of the first century A.D., we can hold in our hands today the wonderful words of God—spirit and life. If we had boldly stated at the beginning that "the disciple whom Jesus loved" in the special instances we have discussed was not John but Joseph-Barnabas, we should not have been believed. But, after these studies, it seems difficult to think otherwise.

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