

## CHAPTER IV.

## A GOSPEL COLLECTION—IRENÆUS.

WE have seen that at the close of the second century the Four Gospels were regarded as a sacred quaternion, and the conception of a "Fourfold Gospel" (*τετράμορφον εὐαγγέλιον*) had already taken root in widely separated quarters of the Church. From the Euphrates Valley to the shores of the western Mediterranean, and from Gaul to the borders of Ethiopia, the Church of Christ at that epoch acknowledged our Four Gospels as the source of her life and the foundation upon which she was content to rest.

But we can trace the collection of Four Gospels to a much earlier period than has yet been indicated. In fact, it is not sufficiently realised, despite the ample investigations of the last thirty years, how early this collection was brought together. It is well worth while following up the traces of a collection before discussing the Gospels one by one.

For this purpose, as well as for his testimony to individual gospels, no writer of the second century is better entitled to be heard than Irenæus, Bishop of Vienne and Lyons in the two last decades of the second century. There has been considerable discussion as to the date of his birth, which is of some consequence, as affecting his testimony to experiences of his early life; but in the meantime it will suffice to note that his great work, 'Against Heresies,' belongs to about the year 185 A.D. As a witness to Catholic usage and practice at this epoch, Irenæus had unusual qualifications; and no man had a larger acquaintance with the thought and speculation of his age.

1. *He had a lofty conception of the Church.*—He regarded her as the authorised custodian and interpreter of the Christian faith; and he attributed to the historic Apostolic Churches, and especially to the Church of Rome, the character of authentic depositories of the genuine Christian tradition. It is with him that the idea of an Apostolical succession in the episcopate is believed to have originated: he is at least the first to give it formulated shape. Whatever we may think of his doctrinal and ecclesiastical positions, the literary and historical aspects of them are of great importance. For Irenæus, the sources of Christian truth are the teaching of Christ and

His Apostles, handed down, first by word of mouth and then by authoritative witnesses, the oral and the written tradition being in full accord. Apostolicity is with him the test of canonicity, Apostolic Churches being the authentic depositories of tradition, the Four Gospels received and handed down by them through an unbroken succession are to him of exclusive and supreme authority. "To him," it has been said, "belongs the distinction of stereotyping the genius of orthodoxy, and founding the Church's polemic method. In an age when wild speculations were in the air, he adheres unswervingly to the Apostolic tradition, enticed from the safe path neither by the dancing lights of gnosticism nor by the steadier flame of Greek philosophic thought."<sup>1</sup>

2. *He had an uncommonly wide acquaintance with the thought of his time.*—His great work, 'Against Heresies,' furnishes ample proof of this. For the intricacies of early gnostic speculation he is our greatest authority. Whilst his own orthodoxy has never been impeached, he has the credit of having given in his treatise a fair and trustworthy exposition of heretical views. He has a firm grasp of Scripture doctrine, and embodies in his book a large amount of sound and interesting exposition of Holy Scripture. "Any

<sup>1</sup> Cruttwell, *Literary History of Early Christianity*, ii. 374.

one," says Bishop Lightfoot, "who will take the pains to read Irenæus through carefully, endeavouring to enter into his historical position in all its bearings, striving to realise what he and his contemporaries thought about the writings of the New Testament, and what grounds they had for thinking it, and, above all, resisting the temptation to read in modern theories between the lines, will be in a more favourable position for judging rightly of the early history of the New Testament canon than if he had read all the monographs which have issued from the German press for the last half century."<sup>1</sup>

3. *He had a high doctrine of Inspiration.*—Speaking of the Old Testament, he says, "It was the Holy Spirit that preached through the prophets the dispensations" (*τὰς οἰκονομίας*). Again, he says, "All the Scriptures being spiritual, both every Scripture given to us from God will be found by us harmonious, and through the variety of the expressions one harmonious melody will be perceived within us." With reference to the Gospels, he declares that, though "fourfold, they are held together by one Spirit." He describes the Apostles, after they had been clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit descending upon them from on high, as "being fully assured about all things, and possessing perfect knowledge."

<sup>1</sup> *Essays on Supernatural Religion*, iv. 141.

In a very interesting passage,<sup>1</sup> he remarks that St Matthew might have said that "the birth of *Jesus* was on this wise," but that the Holy Spirit, foreseeing the depravers of the truth, and guarding against their fraud, said by St Matthew, "the birth of *Christ* was on this wise," showing that He was both,—in other words, that Jesus was Christ from His birth. Thus, what might have seemed the accidental choice of one form of expression rather than another, is ascribed to the directing care of the Holy Spirit. Irenæus held not only the genuineness, but also the inspiration of the Gospels.

4. *He had a varied career in widely separated provinces of the Church.*—He could speak for the Church in Asia Minor, Rome, and Gaul, in all cases from personal experience. He was a native of Asia Minor, and in early youth came under the teaching and influence of Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna and disciple of John the Apostle. In a letter to Florinus, a fellow-disciple in the school of Polycarp, who had fallen into heresy, written in his later life and preserved in the pages of Eusebius, Irenæus refers to their early days together: "I remember the events of that time more clearly than those of recent years, so that I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed,

<sup>1</sup> *Against Heresies*, iii. 16. 2.

and his goings out and his comings in, and the accounts which he gave of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord. And as he remembered their words and what he heard from them concerning the Lord and concerning His miracles and His teaching, having received them from eyewitnesses of the Word of Life, Polycarp related all things in harmony with the Scriptures."<sup>1</sup> There was thus only the space of one life, that of Polycarp, between Irenæus and the Apostolic age—between him and the last survivor of the Apostles, who had leaned upon the Master's breast, and was the disciple whom Jesus loved. When, then, Irenæus refers to particulars in the life of our Lord as related by Polycarp, we have the assurance that the aged Bishop's reminiscences coincided with the accounts contained in the written Gospels, and *a fortiori* that written Gospels were in circulation as a standard for the knowledge of the life and teaching of Jesus in Irenæus's youth in Asia Minor.<sup>2</sup>

It was not in Smyrna, however, that the life-work of Irenæus was done. When we first hear

<sup>1</sup> Euseb. H. E., V. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Harnack's attempt to show that "the Scriptures," with which the reminiscences were in accord, were the Scriptures of the Old Testament, is unconvincing. See 'Das neue Testament um das Jahr 200,' p. 35. Cf. Zahn, GK. i, 169, n. 1; and Harnack, 'Chronologie,' p. 325 ff.

of him in his ecclesiastical relations, he is a presbyter of the Church at Lyons, in Southern Gaul. There is nothing remarkable in this, because Greek colonies from Asia Minor were early established in the valley of the Rhone, and there was much communication by commerce and otherwise between the mother community and the daughter down into Christian times. Whether Irenæus had spent some time at Rome before he settled in the west, there is no record to show. It has been held that his clear conception of the unity of the Catholic Church, his high estimate of Rome as the centre of Catholic tradition, and the eminently practical bent of his mind, all point to residence and labour in Rome before he settled for the work of his life in distant Gaul. However this may be, in 177 A.D., when a terrible persecution, sanctioned by Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor, broke out in Gaul, Irenæus, then a presbyter, was entrusted with the famous Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons to the brethren of the Churches of Asia and Phrygia, and carried it as far as Rome. Among the martyrs in that persecution was Pothinus, the bishop of Lyons, who had reached the patriarchal age of ninety years. The See being vacant, Irenæus was raised to the Episcopal office, the fact showing that he had been long

enough associated with the Church of Lyons to be marked out for the succession.

For a quarter of a century, till his death in 202, he occupied that exalted office, taking an active part in the movements and controversies of the times. His personal relations with Polycarp have been questioned, and his testimony to the credibility of the Gospel history has been disparaged by critics, who find these facts a serious obstacle to their negative theories. Such treatment only serves to bring out the importance of his position and the trustworthiness of his testimony. "Irenæus," says Professor Gutjahr,<sup>1</sup> in his acute and learned work on 'The Trustworthiness of the Testimony of Irenæus,' written to meet these attempts at depreciation, "was assuredly neither a troglodyte to whom human voice had never penetrated; nor the inhabitant of an island forgotten by the world, upon whose shores no wave of spiritual life ever breaks; nor a misanthropist recluse holding himself aloof from the ways of men; nor an indifferent creature lacking all interest in and all acquaintance with the questions of the time,—he was everything the very reverse. His life unfolded itself in the most important scenes and centres of ecclesiastical and religious life in Smyrna, in Rome, in Gaul, and he occupied for long the influential

<sup>1</sup> Glaubwürdigkeit des Irenäischen Zeugnisses, p. 14.

positions of presbyter and Bishop of Lyons. He stood in many-sided personal relations to the outstanding personalities of his generation, took the liveliest interest and the most active part in all the great controversies of the closing decades of the second century, the Paschal controversy, the Montanist controversy, and was in particular himself one of the foremost and most successful champions of truth against Gnostic error, as well as one of the most important witnesses and defenders of the New Testament canon."

The foregoing considerations give weight to any special judgment which Irenæus might deliver on the subject of the Gospels. It is in the Third Book of his treatise 'Against Heresies' that we have the fullest and most explicit account of the Gospel collection. He is the first of the early Fathers to condescend upon the names of all the Evangelists. "As it was in the power of the Holy Spirit," he says,<sup>1</sup> "that the Apostles preached, so it was in the same power that the Evangelists put the glad tidings on record." Matthew, he goes on to say, published a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own language, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the Church. And after their departure (*ἔξοδον*, which may mean "death"), Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed

<sup>1</sup> *Adversus Hæreses*, iii. 1.

down in writing what had been preached by him. Luke, also, the companion of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel preached by him. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned upon His breast, himself also published his Gospel while staying at Ephesus in Asia. "So firm is the ground upon which the Gospels rest that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and starting from them, each one of them endeavours to establish his own peculiar doctrine,"<sup>1</sup> again enumerating the Four Gospels and affirming their authorship. When we consider the learning and the critical acumen of Irenæus, as exhibited in his exposition and discussion of prevalent heresies; when we recall the facilities which he enjoyed for ascertaining accurate particulars of the history of the Apostles and those who were associated with them; when, moreover, we remember that he had to deal with opponents ready to question unfounded or unguarded statements, we may confidently believe that he knew whereof he spoke when he called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John the authors of the Fourfold Gospel. It would require very strong and explicit evidence to overthrow the testimony of a witness with such qualifications for ascertaining and declaring the truth.

Irenæus knew the Four Gospels as the work

<sup>1</sup> *Adversus Hæreses*, iii. 11. 7.

of the authors he names, the same to whom tradition, from the second century to the nineteenth, has explicitly assigned them. But Irenæus goes further, and claims for them in clear and unmistakable terms exclusive authority. His description of the Fourfold Gospel is specially noteworthy. He is arguing that it is one and the same God, the Creator of heaven and earth, whom the Prophets foretold and the Gospels announced. In opposition to heretics, who held that the God of the Old Testament is inferior to the God of the New, he maintains that neither Prophets nor Apostles acknowledged any other Lord God save the Lord and God supreme; the Prophets and the Apostles alike confessing the Father and the Son, but reverencing no other as God and confessing no other as Lord. The Old Testament knows nothing of a God above the God of Israel who chose Jerusalem; and the New Testament as little of a Word descending upon Jesus at His baptism,—it knows only Jesus Christ, the Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us. To justify his contention, Irenæus turns to the Gospels in succession and vindicates his position from them. He then proceeds<sup>1</sup> to formulate his doctrine of the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the Gospel quaternion: “It is impossible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number

<sup>1</sup> *Adversus Hæreses*, iii. 11. 8.

than they are. For since there are four regions of the world in which we live, and also four principal winds, while the Church has been dispersed over the whole earth, and the Gospel is the pillar and ground of the Church and the breath of her life, it is fitting that she should have four pillars, from all quarters breathing incorruption, and rekindling the spiritual life of men. Whereby it is evident that the Artificer of all things, the Word who sitteth upon the cherubim and holdeth all things together, when He was manifested to men gave us the Gospel in four aspects, but held together by one Spirit. As David says, entreating the manifestation of His presence, 'Thou that sittest between the cherubims, shine forth.' For the cherubim were fourfold and their faces images of the dispensation (*τῆς πρῶτης*) of the Son of God. For, as the Scripture saith, The first living creature was like a lion, symbolising His effectual working, and His leadership, and His royal estate; the second, like a calf, signifying His sacrificial and priestly office; the third, having the face of a man, evidently describing His advent as man; and the fourth, like a flying eagle, setting forth the gift of the Spirit resting upon the Church. The Gospels, therefore, are comparable to those figures among which Christ is seated. For the Gospel according to John relates His original, effectual, and glorious

generation from the Father, saying, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and was God.' Also, 'All things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made.' But the Gospel according to Luke, as being of a priestly character, began with Zacharias the priest offering incense to God. For already the fatted calf was being prepared which was to be slain in honour of the younger son. Matthew, again, proclaims His human birth, saying, 'The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham,' and, 'Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise.' This Gospel, therefore, is of human aspect; wherefore, also, through the whole of it, the character of a lowly-minded and meek man is maintained. Mark, on the other hand, commenced with a reference to the prophetic spirit, which came from on high upon men, saying, 'The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is written in Esaias the prophet,'—pointing to the winged aspect of the Gospel, on which account he made his narrative concise and rapid, for this is the note of the prophetic character. . . . These things being so, all who destroy the form of the Gospel are vain and unlearned, and, moreover, audacious, representing the aspects of the Gospel as being either more or fewer than has been mentioned; the

former that they may appear to have discovered more than the truth, the latter that they may set the dispensations of God aside."

The importance of this testimony of Irenæus cannot well be overestimated. Although he wrote his treatise 'Against Heresies' about 185 A.D., it was not then for the first time that the Fourfold Gospel appealed to his judgment. He writes as if in the course of his long and varied career, doing battle against Gnosticism and Montanism, and building up the Church, in times of trial and persecution, on the truth of the Gospel, he had never known any other save the Four. Zahn is well entitled to say: "Irenæus did not employ empty words when he spoke of the Four Gospels as the pillars which from time immemorial have supported the fabric of the Catholic Church. So stood they without any rival in the churches of the land of his birth, as well as in those over which he was Bishop, and also in Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, and Antioch."<sup>1</sup>

It is evidence of the cardinal position which he occupies in the history of early Christian literature and of the New Testament canon, that great exertions have been put forth by the negative critics to break down his evidence or to explain it away.

I. Objection has been taken to the symbolism

<sup>1</sup> Zahn, GK. i. 192.

which he employs to describe and illustrate the Gospel collection of Four. It is said to be rather the fantastic conception of a dogmatist than the sober-minded testimony of a historian. But this is surely quite to misunderstand the object which Irenæus has in view. Symbolism is with him an afterthought. In another place<sup>1</sup> he shows how five can be a symbolic number, having a wide prevalence in the Scriptures—five loaves for the five thousand; five virgins wise and foolish; five men on the Mount of Transfiguration—Peter, James, John, Moses, Elias; five ages of human life—infancy, boyhood, youth, maturity, old age, and so on. It does not determine the Gospel quaternion, but is used in accordance with Oriental modes of expression to illustrate it. Irenæus found Four Gospels in possession of the field, each presenting its own view of the great Divine subject of them all, and all combining in a complete and harmonious presentation of the Godman so adequate to the spiritual requirements of the Church, that when he wished to find symbols for them he could find nothing more suitable, whether in things sacred or things secular, than the four faces of the cherubim, or the four living creatures of the Apocalypse, or the four quarters of the heavens, or the four principal

<sup>1</sup> *Against Heresies*, ii. 24. 4.

winds. There is nothing in the symbolism he employs to infer dogmatic or polemic purpose beyond what was perfectly legitimate; nothing certainly to disqualify him from being a trustworthy witness to fact.

2. Objection is taken to a remarkable statement of Irenæus<sup>1</sup> to the effect that Jesus did not die at the age of thirty or in His thirties, but attained an age between forty and fifty, thus having experience of all the gradations of human life. But this is not all. He backs up this remarkable statement by a reference to St John's Gospel, where the Jews say to Jesus, "Thou art not fifty years old and hast Thou seen Abraham?" and to the elders, who had consorted with St John in Asia, and who agreed in declaring that this was St John's view of the length of our Lord's life. When the context, in which these peculiar assertions appear, is examined, they are seen to be much less damaging to the credit of Irenæus than would appear at the first blush. He has been contesting the view of the Valentinians (a view held by several of the early Fathers and also held by some orthodox theologians to this day) that our Lord's ministry was really confined to a year, and that Jesus died at its close just as He completed His thirtieth year of earthly life. He

<sup>1</sup> *Against Heresies*, ii. 22.

meets this erroneous view, as he considers it, first, by a better exposition of the passage of St Luke, where Jesus speaks of "the acceptable year of the Lord"; secondly, by an enumeration of at least three annual Passover feasts which Jesus is represented as attending; thirdly, by the theoretical opinion that it behoved Jesus to reach the maturity of middle life, between forty and fifty, to do justice to His calling as the Perfect Teacher of mankind; and fourthly, by a reference to the passage in St John's Gospel, where the Jews express the opinion that our Lord had not reached fifty years. The theoretical argument of Irenæus appears to our ways of thinking unquestionably weak, but the imputation against his credibility as a historian would only be serious if on the one hand it implied ignorance of the Gospel narratives, or, on the other, it showed carelessness in reporting the statements of his authorities. As regards the latter, an examination of the passage discloses the fact that the only point affirmed by the Presbyters of Asia was that our Lord's ministry lasted more than a single year; and as regards the former, no one can read the treatise of Irenæus without finding on every page proofs of ample and accurate acquaintance with the Gospel history. Even if it be that in this passage Irenæus shows less than his wonted lucidity of statement, and perhaps more than his wonted

keenness as a controversialist, there is no ground for discrediting him as a historian.<sup>1</sup>

3. Objection is taken to the testimony of Irenæus on the ground that he was only a boy when he saw and heard Polycarp, and so failed to discern that Polycarp was the hearer not of John the Apostle but of another John, better known to modern criticism than to antiquity, John the Presbyter. Of this view Professor Harnack may be regarded as a strenuous representative. In his 'Chronology of the Early Christian Literature,'<sup>2</sup> he admits that Irenæus believed the John of whom Polycarp spoke to be the Apostle, but then he assumes that the memories of Irenæus are those of his childhood, and not to be relied upon when he records them in his old age. Harnack, however, puts a strain upon the language of the letter of Irenæus to Florinus which it will not bear. In that letter Irenæus speaks of himself as a lad (*παῖς*) when Florinus was out in the world and achieving success; he recalls to his erring companion, who had become a heretic, the lessons they had learned together at the feet of Polycarp, and speaks of them as if they had continued over a considerable time; and he claims an elderly man's privilege of remembering the lessons and

<sup>1</sup> See Lightfoot, *Essays on Supernatural Religion*, p. 246; *Journal of Theological Studies*, Oct. 1907, p. 53 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Chronologie*, pp. 320 ff.; 656 ff.

events of youth better than the experiences of later years. In another place he testifies to having seen Polycarp in his first youth (*ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ ἡμῶν ἡλικίᾳ*), that is, in his early manhood, and though we have no record to show that he had intercourse with him later, that does not exclude the possibility that he had. We may believe that if Professor Harnack had not felt himself under the necessity of holding to John the Presbyter as the author of the Fourth Gospel, he would not have pressed language so keenly to make Irenæus appear but a child when he heard Polycarp discoursing upon John, and as a child incapable of discriminating between the Apostle and the Presbyter. The language does not warrant any such inference, and, even if Irenæus had been so young as Harnack implies, we can scarcely believe that he had not conversed with companions, or others of more mature age, at a later time, able to correct the mistakes of his early days and to set him right on such a question. "We used to think," says Professor Gwatkin of Cambridge, "with Irenæus himself, that the memories of early life are the most indelible of all. When some trifle recalls them we often see them returning, even in extreme old age, with all the vividness and certainty of yesterday. Human nature must be much the same in all ages, and it was the life's work both

of Polycarp and Irenæus to keep the deposit entrusted to them. I see no escape from the conclusion that this is more than almost any other a question on which it is hardly in human nature that Irenæus can be mistaken, when he tells us that the Apostle John, and not another, was the teacher of his old master Polycarp.”<sup>1</sup>

4. It has nevertheless been questioned whether the assertion of Irenæus, attributing exclusive authority to these Four Gospels, holds good for the whole Church at this early period. In Alexandria, as we have seen, Clement, writing early in the third century, seems to draw a distinction between what is handed down in our Four Gospels and what is circulated in other Gospels; but he regards with favour the Gospel according to the Egyptians and the Gospel according to the Hebrews; and he quotes also apocryphal sayings of Jesus that were still current in the Church. Harnack will have it<sup>2</sup> that the Gospel according to the Egyptians is no heretical production, but a Gospel which had established itself from the beginning in Egypt. For this he brings but the scantiest proof, and Zahn is right in maintaining<sup>3</sup> that the Church of Alexandria had about

<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Review, 1897, p. 222. See also Stanton, Gospels, p. 213 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Das neue Testament um das Jahr 200 A.D.; *Altchristliche Literatur*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> GK. i. 176. *Comp. Einige Bemerkungen.*

200 A.D. no other Gospel than the Churches of Rome and Carthage and Lyons. If Clement is more free in his Scripture references than some of the other Fathers, this is due more to the peculiar bent of his mind than to a different condition of things. Just as Clement's theology "is not a unit but a confused eclectic mixture of the true Christian elements with many Stoic, Platonic, and Philonic ingredients,"<sup>1</sup> so his conception of inspired Scripture was also more comprehensive. In Syria, we find about the close of the second century a Gospel in circulation bearing the name of Peter, the same which has recently been discovered by Dr Rendel Harris, and is now known to be a distinctly Docetic production. But this Gospel, which Serapion, the Bishop of Rhossus, is willing to have read in his diocese, is not proved to have enjoyed general acceptance and use in the Church, but only to have been allowed for private and individual perusal. There is no reason to doubt that the Gospel quartette set forth by Irenæus was adopted thus early throughout the whole Church.

We conclude in favour of the credibility of Irenæus. We hold that less than a hundred years from the time when eyewitnesses survived of the miraculous works of Jesus of Nazareth, and when companions of the Apostles were living

<sup>1</sup> Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Christianity*, ii. 783.

to tell to the succeeding generation what manner of men they were, we have a reliable witness, with learning, with retentive memory, and with sobriety of judgment as well as acuteness of intellect, vouching for it that Four Gospels, and only Four, were received as sacred authorities in widely separated quarters of the Church, and assigning to the Four the names by which they have all along been known, as if no other had ever belonged to them.