

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHEPHERD OF HERMAS—THE NUMBER FOUR.

FROM Irenæus we travel back thirty years to come to Justin Martyr, and from Justin another thirty to the Shepherd of Hermas and the testimony borne to a Gospel collection in that remarkable writing. There is some difficulty in fixing the exact date of this apocalyptic work, the 'Pilgrim's Progress' of the early Church, greatly esteemed and highly popular. The great Fathers of the third century, like Origen and others, considered Hermas to be the person of that name saluted by St Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. Zahn holds that it is another Hermas who is the subject of the visions, though he gives the book an early date, about 97-100 A.D. But a date somewhat later, between 110 and 125 A.D., has commended itself to other scholars.¹ The Shepherd is pecu-

¹ See Stanton, 'The Gospels as Historical Documents,' p. 41 and n. Cf. p. 81.

liar, even among the apostolic Fathers, in this that it cites no book either of the Old or New Testament by name, although it makes allusion to an apocryphal book (now lost) called 'Eldad and Modat.' It does not contain a quotation from any apocryphal gospel. Its whole teaching is in perfect accord with the New Testament Scriptures. It had the widest circulation of any extra-canonical book, and seems to have been regarded as in some sense Holy Scripture down to the first decades of the third century in Rome and in Carthage, in Catholic and Montanist circles alike. When the Sinaitic Manuscript was discovered by Tischendorf a large portion of the Shepherd was found incorporated, showing the high esteem in which it was held when that manuscript was written. There are coincidences to be found in the Shepherd with the language and teaching of St Matthew, St Mark, St Luke, St John, the Acts, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and the Apocalypse. There are, besides, resemblances of expression, and even of sentiment, to St James's Epistles.

It has fallen, however, to Dr Charles Taylor,¹ Master of St John's College, Cambridge, — a mathematical scholar who, like the late Rev. Dr Salmon of Dublin, betook himself in later

¹ See his 'Witness of Hermas to the Four Gospels.'

life to critical and patristic studies,—to discover through its somewhat obscure allusions the suggestion which lies at the foundation of Irenæus's description of the Fourfold Gospel. That Irenæus knew the Shepherd is certain. He quotes it, and goes the length of calling it Scripture. Eusebius, who had diligently perused the works of Irenæus, takes special note of his quotation from the Shepherd. The passages of Hermas, in which Irenæus may have found the suggestion of Four and only Four Gospels, are as follows: "That thou seest a woman sitting upon a bench, strong is the assertion: for the bench hath four feet, and stands firm: for the world is compacted of four elements" (Vis. iii. 13. 3); "Therefore there were four rows in the foundation of the tower. . . . The first stones, he says, the ten that have been laid for foundations, are the first generation, the twenty-five the first generation of just men; and there are the twenty-five prophets of God and His servants; and there are the forty apostles and teachers of the preaching of the Son of God" (Sim., ix. 4. 3; 15. 4). The woman sitting upon the bench is the Church, and the four feet of the bench are the Four Gospels, upon which the Church is upheld. Again, the tower in the Similitude which stands four-square, and which also adumbrates the Church, suggests the Four Gospels by the four

rows in its foundations. The correspondence between Irenæus and Hermas is remarkable, and is regarded by Dr Charles Taylor as too close to be accidental. While Hermas depicts the Church as seated on a bench, with four feet representing the Four Gospels, Irenæus says that the Son of God sits upon the four cherubim or living creatures, and that these correspond to the Four Gospels. While Hermas argues that the Gospels, the support of the Church's seat, are four in number because the world is compacted of four elements, Irenæus concludes that the Gospel must have had four constituents to correspond with the fabric of the universe, which was understood to be made up of four elements. Origen compares the Four Gospels to the elements of the faith of the Church, of which elements the whole world consists. While the four rows in Hermas stand for cosmic generations, each of which had received a message of good news, corresponding to one of the Four Gospels, Irenæus says that the Logos revealed Himself to all the four generations, and each of them received a covenant, each revelation and covenant corresponding to one of the canonical Gospels. "The Church in Irenæus," says Dr Taylor, "has the Gospel for its one pillar, and the Gospels for its four pillars: analogous to this in Hermas are the figures of the one bench with

four feet, and the one foundation with its four rows or tiers representing the Gospel and the Gospels. . . . I maintain, on the strength of the evidence adduced, that the famous sayings of Irenæus on the actual and necessary fourfoldness of the Gospel were not his own, but a reproduction of what Hermas had written a generation before; that Hermas, in his enigmatic way, represented the Four Gospels as having already obtained a unique and canonical position; and that, in any case, they had obtained this position in the lifetime and to the knowledge of Hermas, who wrote not in any obscure corner of the earth, but in its capital, Rome.”¹

The argument of Dr C. Taylor, elaborately and carefully worked out, with proofs too numerous to be mentioned here, is not to be set aside by the remark that the Church had not yet definitely selected the Four Canonical Gospels in the time of Hermas. That is just the point to be proved. Such selection can only be attested by individual references like this; and though the allusions of Hermas are of a cryptic character, the well-known passage in Irenæus suggests the key. It cannot be alleged that there is any allusion to any other Gospel than our four. Professor Stanton, who comes on independent grounds to the same general con-

¹ Witness of Hermas, pp. 17, 18.

clusion as Dr Taylor, does not consider himself justified in holding that by this time "the Four Gospels were consciously separated off from all other works of the same kind and classed together as of co-ordinate and unique authority,—in other words, that the conception of the 'four-fold Gospel' already existed."¹ The obscure character of the references in Hermas may not allow us to go all the length spoken of by Dr Stanton. But if there be anything in Dr Taylor's argument at all, we find a collection of Four Gospels with a certain measure of authority half a century earlier than the famous declaration of Irenæus, and several years earlier than the date assigned by Baur and his school for the composition of St John and others of the Four.

What, then, is the ground for FOUR as the number of the Gospels? Four, to be sure, is the number of the world, and Four Gospels would mark the universality to which the message of the Gospel is destined, even as there are four primary elements, four winds, four seasons, four corners of the earth, and four quarters of the heavens. The number four was a sacred number in the old Hebrew literature: Jehovah manifested His glory in the quadrangular plan of both

¹ Gospels as Historical Documents, p. 47.

tabernacle and temple, and in the city, which lieth four-square, whose length is as great as its breadth, the New Jerusalem of the Apocalypse.¹ It is not, however, out of regard to the symbolism of numbers that the Church has adopted Four Gospels. There might have been seven, which is the number of perfection, as there are Seven Spirits of God, and Seven Churches represented by seven lamp-stands in the Apocalypse; or five, as there are in man five senses, and in the Law and in the Psalms five books. Symbolism, as we have seen, is with Irenæus an afterthought; it does not determine the Gospel quaternion, τὸ τετραεναγγέλιον, but is used in accordance with the fashion of the East, and of the time, to illustrate it. There were by the beginning of the second century Four Gospels, which soon approved themselves to the heart and conscience of the Church as trustworthy and reliable records of the Life and Discourses and Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Any tentative records that might have been in circulation (such as those referred to in Luke i. 1) had served their purpose and fallen out of use. There were no others that could be said to approach them in

¹ Harnack likens the Four to a university with its quadrivium, its four faculties, John being the theologian, Luke the physician, Mark the philologist, Matthew the lawyer. In the Muratorian Canon St Luke is designated *Studiosus juris*. 'Medicine in the Earliest Church History,' Texte u. Unters, viii. 39.

general acceptance and use in all the widely separated quarters of the Church,—not the Gospel according to the Hebrews, which was apparently a Gospel for Jewish Christians, the Gospel of a sect, and outside of Palestine little known; not the Gospel of the Egyptians, which was clearly ascetic in its character and confined to a small circle of admirers; not the Gospel of Peter, which was docetic in its tendency, and known only in Syria and Egypt. No party ends were served by the Four Gospels as we have them. They were not perhaps at first all regarded with equal favour,—we have seen that St Matthew was most popular from the beginning,—but they were the best known and the most widely circulated. And thus they grew into the canon of Four which we find stereotyped in Irenæus, and exclusively upheld by Tertullian and Origen.

The question has been raised, Why have we in the New Testament four Gospels, and not one only? ¹ One would appear to be the most natural and most convenient for the purposes of private and public edification; and the followers of Marcion were content with one, the mutilated Luke of that heretic; the Syrian Christians found Tatian's Diatessaron for centuries adequate to their requirements; and other sects had only

¹ Harnack, *Reden u. Aufsätze*, ii. 239 ff.; Leipoldt, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, p. 142 ff.

one Gospel. Professor Harnack is of opinion that the four would ultimately have been melted down into one had not special circumstances intervened to make the Church cling tenaciously to the Gospels which had found favour, and to use them as an arsenal of weapons to overcome hostile assaults. The main factor in this situation was Gnosticism; and Gnosticism on the one hand, and the practical requirements of the Church on the other, stayed the process of unification and left us with the four. Leipoldt thinks that the process was hindered by the requirements of the struggle of the Church against Marcion, by the early efforts at canonising individual books of New Testament Scripture, and especially by the rivalry which he conceives to have subsisted at a very early stage between the Synoptics and the fourth Gospel. This implies that the Synoptic Gospels had been already brought together and were regarded as an entity by themselves; but there is nothing to show when this had taken place. That the idea of the fourfold Gospel took possession of the Church when she recognised in St John's Gospel that which seemed to make the representation of the Redeemer adequate and complete, is most natural. There is reason to believe that the collection of the Four was first realised and completed in Asia Minor, though it may have happened simultan-

eously under the influence of the same ideas in other provinces. It may well have been borne in upon the heart of the Church in the early years of the second century, when St John's Gospel was yet fresh with the dew of heaven, that now the Christian had in those Four Gospels a complete portrait of the Master and a full-orbed presentation of His teaching. The teachers of the Church may have felt that in those four they had enough, yet none to spare. That they were four, coincided in the spiritual realm with other works of God in the realm of natural and physical things. That they soon came to be all esteemed of equal authority, and all to be sacred Scripture, like the books of the Old Testament, is clear from the witness of the early Fathers. Although St Mark and St Luke were less esteemed in some quarters, yet all four have been preserved, and St Mark has now come to its own. They were Four Gospels, but yet One Gospel: an adequate substitute for the oral teaching of the Apostles, now that those great lights had disappeared from the firmament of the early Church.