

1903

The apologetic aim of the writer of the first gospel

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/47609>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

THE APOLOGETIC AIM OF THE WRITER OF THE FIRST GOSPEL.

F.W. ROHER.

The Apologetic Aim of the Writer of the First Gospel.

The date of the composition of the Gospel according to St. Matthew is not definitely known. Most scholars agree in placing it near A.D. 70. But whether it was just before or soon after the destruction of Jerusalem has not been determined. In trying to arrive at a conclusion as to the date much account is taken of the 24th. chapter. But the dangers threatened may apply to the conditions existing before as well as after the fall of Jerusalem. On the whole it may be more satisfactory to think of the Gospel assuming its present form about A.D. 68-69.

The writer like the date is not clearly distinguished. At first it would seem that the Gospel according to Matthew (κατὰ Ματθαῖον) would mean the Apostle by that name. And so it was probably intended. But this does not necessarily make the Apostle the writer of it; it may mean the Gospel as preached by Matthew. Neither would this imply deception on the part of the writer. For he may have intended merely to set forth the preaching of the Apostle and thus give an indirect Gospel by Matthew. Other persons of a later time have omitted the indirect link and attributed the Gospel to Matthew himself. But we seem to have strong evidence that Matthew was not the author

of the first Gospel.

Our chief historic reference is to Papias as quoted by Eusebius. Papias died about A.D. 160-165. Irenaeus, who was then about twenty-five years old, and who became Bishop of Lyons in A.D. 178, says that Papias was a disciple of St. John.

Papias wrote "Expositions of the Lord's Sayings." Quoting from these Eusebius makes Papias say that "Matthew composed the Logia in the Hebrew language and each writer interpreted them as he could." But no Gospel has been found in the Hebrew language, and our Matthew is not translated from the Hebrew. This is shown in the quotations he makes from the Old Testament.

In this Gospel there are ten quotations from the Old Testament concerning the fulfillment of prophecy not mentioned by Mark or Luke. (1:23; 2:15,19,23; 4:15f; 9:17; 12:18-21; 13:35; 21:5; 27:9f.) Nearly half of the words composing these citations are not found in the LXX equivalents. While in nineteen quotations common to Matthew and Mark or Luke, less than one sixth of the words differ from the LXX. Scholars say this amounts to almost positive proof that the first Gospel is not a translation from the earlier Hebrew manuscript.

The Apostle Matthew was probably dead when our Gospel which now bears his name was written. The writer no doubt set forth the sayings, teachings and work of Jesus as Matthew

taught them. Just as St. Mark wrote the Gospel as Peter preached it. If this was the way the Gospel came to be written, what was the probable occasion for its composition and what would probably be the aim of its writer?

Abraham Lincoln was assassinated thirty-eight years ago. The writer of the first Gospel was removed from the crucifixion of Jesus at least thirty-eight years. What would a present day biographer of Lincoln do? If all books, magazines, friends and relatives would be asked to contribute whatever of information they had toward the author's purpose, could we not expect that a friend-biographer of the Son of God would make careful preparation for his work? And does not the Gospel itself prove that the author had carefully gathered and arranged his materials? Notice the careful labor implied in the long genealogy; the family record; the grouping of the Sayings of Jesus, the Parables, the Miracles, all this orderly arrangement indicates plan and purpose.

His resources would not be as many and as easy of access as would those of a biographer of the present day, but he had the traditions, the advantage of consulting eye-witnesses, the Gospel of St. Mark, and the Logia of St. Matthew if they had been written - and if they were not written he would have the material out of which they were supposed to have been written. He had also the Old Testament with which he shows himself

to be quite familiar. He was a Palestinian Jew as the Gospel reveals, though probably in Phoenicia at the time of writing. Let us notice the time in which he lived and the circumstances which surrounded him before we assign him a motive for his work.

Forty years or more had passed since the prophet of the wilderness cried, "Behold the Lamb of God." Later Jesus declared himself to be the Son of God, and he lived and died as such. The centurion said, "Surely this was the Son of God." "He was crucified, dead, and buried;" but "the third day he rose from the dead," he tarried with his disciples forty days and then returned again to Heaven. This is the one story repeated to every generation, but how new and vital it must have for the first half century?

Ten days after the ascension the Holy Ghost descended and took possession of the followers of Jesus and began the conquest of the world for Christ. Through the power of the Holy Ghost hundreds and thousands had accepted the resurrection doctrine and freely worshipped the risen Lord. In less than twenty years Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria had been filled with the doctrine of the Son of God, and the chief persecutor of Christians had seized the Gospel message and hastened to carry it in person to the uttermost parts of the world.

But Stephen and James and a host of others, had already

become the first fruits of martyrdom before the matchless Paul had started on his labor of love. And martyrdom was yet common and persecution was in no way diminished. Every year while the number of disciples increased the number of those who had seen and heard Jesus decreased. Thirty-eight years after Jesus left this world most of those who had been his companions had gone to be with him. Even Paul was dead; Peter was dead; almost all the apostles and nearly all the early disciples were dead. How long before the last eye-witness to Jesus would be gone? What would be left to show that he had been here at all? How should his followers teach the rising generation who and what he was?

These questions may have suggested the necessity for a complete setting forth of the facts of the early life of Jesus. Mark had already written a good account but many things were omitted, and the style and language were not the best. He said nothing about the childhood of Jesus; perhaps he knew nothing. Our writer knew or found out if he did not know. Did he go to the mother of Jesus? Was she yet living? Was it then that she revealed what formerly she had kept and pondered in her heart?

The writer also knew or found out many things not earlier stated, and arranged them in what he considered to be the strongest presentation and set them forth as a complete record of the Son of God in the world. And was it for pure historical

purposes that he did so? We do not so believe. While he may have had many reasons for writing an account of Jesus we believe that the chief aim was to prove that Jesus was the Messiah of the Old Testament.

This we notice at the very beginning of the Gospel. Jesus comes into the world according to prophecy. His birth-place, his flight to Egypt, and his residence at Nazareth are fixed and conditioned by prophecy. And again and again through the Gospel we are interrupted by the explanatory phrase "that it might be fulfilled which was written." Sometimes this is used even when it spoils the beauty of the narrative.

There is no doubt that our writer flew to the Old Testament for sanction of a great deal he said. It would be difficult to reconcile his idea of the fulfillment of prophecy with our idea of the same thing. This can only be done by considering his standpoint. To the Jewish mind anything was a fulfillment of prophecy which happened to be like the prophecy in form or letter. It was not even necessary to have all the points of resemblance. So our writer does not hesitate to use what ever he finds in the Old Testament that in form or likeness will support his contention. But we must bear in mind that his readers had the same idea of prophecy that he had, so that it would be as effective in that day and generation as it is with us when a writer thinks as we think.

Most persons before A.D. 70, Jewish as well as Gentile, did not closely associate Jesus with the Old Testament. He was a great teacher they all believed; that his life was more than human most persons would admit; but that he was the Messiah of prophecy none but his followers would grant and many of them, being Gentiles, would be ignorant of prophecy. Probably most people for forty years or more after the death of Jesus believed because of the report of eye-witnesses to the doings and sayings of Jesus. If these teachers disappeared could weaker teachers win the rising generation and also spread the message?

The writer of the First Gospel evidently thought not; and he proposed to give to the followers of Jesus a complete account proven by Scripture that would not vary with succeeding generations, and that would be sufficient for all time.

Such an account was needed to offset the efforts of the false teachers who insisted on making Jesus a Rabbi and nothing more, except a false Rabbi.

It was needed to correct the misconceptions of true believers; those who would click together and follow one leader, and thus divide the family of Christ. It was also needed especially among the scattered Jews, or the Diaspora (Diaspora).

The political situation in Palestine had been uncertain

for a long time. The Jews said to Pilate when he wanted to release Jesus, "his blood be upon us and our children," and their request was granted. They secured the body of Jesus some forty years before the penalty for taking his life was inflicted upon them. They had never repented of their deed, at least the rulers of Jerusalem had not. In their boastful, bigoted manner they invited the destruction of their city and temple which the emperor of Rome would have gladly turned aside. If the date selected, A.D. 68-69, be correct it was just as this awful storm of Roman wrath was gathering about Jerusalem that our writer was at work. The Christians had been scattered frequently at other times but now there would be a complete dispersion. No more gathering at Jerusalem, no more church or synagogue worship on the holy hill, but a complete banishment. The signs of such an event are always seen by a few at least. Preparations are always made by the wise and prudent. And can we not see in this threatened destruction of Jerusalem and temple, which had been foretold by Jesus, the urgent necessity of a complete narrative of the life of Jesus?

The writer of the First Gospel has given to the world a strong defense of the life and death of Jesus Christ. It has been needed in every age but in none so much as the one in which it was written. It linked the new life with the old! conception of religion; it was the new spiritual graft on the

old formal religious stock, it meant the clearing away of all brush and rubbish of false tradition, and the implanting of simple saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This Gospel marks the transition from the fragmentary method of teaching what Jesus said and did, to the superior method of seeing his life, death, and resurrection as a series of events in the fulfillment of prophecy. It shows us also that this was God's method of revealing himself to the world. It would therefore explain the hostility of the Jews, give ample reason for all that was mysterious about Jesus, and link the whole transaction of redemption with the will of Jehovah who was the one mighty God.

That the Gospel served its purpose of giving believers an abiding faith in Jesus as the Saviour of the world is not questioned in history, and is best understood by the confidence it now establishes in the hearts of all who put their trust in him. We too believe that he will be with us "even unto the end."