

THE BIBLE AND THE ROSARY

M.-J. LAGRANGE, O.P.

III—*The Gospel according to Saint Luke.*



WHILE Peter was preaching the gospel at Rome above all to the Jews who were in great numbers there, Paul, at the time when he was about to annihilate the beginnings of Christianity in Damascus, was enlightened by Jesus Christ in person, converted and destined to convert his coreligionists, and more especially the pagans. Antioch was then queen of Syria, the intermediary for commerce between the Orient, independent of Rome, and the Graeco-Latin empire. It was also the principal center of Greek culture after Athens and Alexandria. It was there that the disciples of Jesus were named Christians. These new converts were little preoccupied with the Jewish origins of the Gospel: rather, these would have been an obstacle for them. What religious souls, dissatisfied with impure religions even under their highest form, were waiting for, was a Savior who would grant them the pardon of their sins, who would aid them to lead a better life. The Jews had offered to initiate them into their Law, but on the condition that they would be incorporated into Judaism. The pagans could not understand that the God Who created the world should not have provided for all men a universal religion embracing all religions, leaving them free to keep their place in the order of humanity.

This is precisely what Paul preached, namely, that there were no longer Jews, nor Greeks, but only the faithful of Christ, associated by faith in His death and His resurrection. It should be added that the intellectual elite of these converts had been formed in the cultivation of belles-lettres. The higher the theme of the discourse, the more ordered should the composition be, each kind according to its rules. The *genre* of biographies of great men had already been inaugurated. Athens, and even more so Rome, had the cult of those great minds or those great captains who had inaugurated new systems of philosophy or religion, who had defended and enlarged the fatherland. Even though Jesus had not reigned by arms, his influence had inaugurated new relations between God and man, between all the members of humanity. Therefore he had the right to a biography more conformable

* Note: First instalment appeared in the Winter issue.

to the historical *genre* than were the polemic of Matthew or the scattered details collected by Mark from the preaching of Peter. Paul had among his companions a doctor who had probably attached himself to him to look after him and had been associated with his apostolic work. A member of the gentility, with a culture already finished, he undertook to address to a distinguished man, as was the custom, a sketch of the life of Jesus Christ which should set down in writing that which the first apostles knew as having been witnesses thereto. Under their patronage, future Christians would be able to guarantee the truth of the facts and the approximate order in which they had taken place.

One can see what a program the doctor Luke had taken upon himself. He was not to expose the particular doctrine of Paul, following the preaching of Jesus. Nor was it his task to investigate the influences under which the thought and the religious life of Christ had taken shape, since, being the incarnate Son of God, He held from above the gifts proper to His ministry. But the novelty of His teaching was to appear more clearly by comparing it to that of His adversaries. His life was to bring into view in some measure the Pharisees and the Saducees, Herod, the principal figure of a little state, and his successors. Nevertheless, since the Gospel is meant for the whole inhabited earth, Luke enlarges the **Palestinian framework and connects** the beginning of the Gospel with the destinies of the empire. With an unheard-of boldness he places above Augustus, the so-often hailed benefactor of humanity, the child born in a stable as the true Savior. His genealogy does not only go back to Abraham, it begins at Adam, the first father, come from the hands of God.

From reading St. Matthew one concludes that Christ had come to fulfil the promise made by God to Israel. The Gentiles could not claim this title which was in some sort legal. Why then had the Messiah of the Jews, the Christ, come to look for them? By reason of His mercy for sinners. Hence, in the third Gospel, there are many episodes in which the ancient Fathers in their homilies saw the appeal of the divine goodness, become in the God-man a veritable compassion, a suffering of the heart for physical, and above all, for moral evil. Recall Jesus consoling the widow of Naim: "Weep not!" See the sinful woman in tears at His feet and Jesus rewarding this great love with pardon. Read and reread the harrowing adventure of the prodigal son wherein the joy of the Father who had found his child again breaks forth in face of the coldness of the eldest son who had never had to be forgiven anything, not realizing that his protest against mercy is a grave offense.

The Gentiles, even that austere Roman St. Gregory, could not read these stories without tears, because in the guilty one whom Jesus pursued with His love they seemed to see their own world, the Gentile world which had lived without a religious Law, and which had only to believe in an eternal love in order to obtain its salvation.

Naturally Luke in his search for guaranteed testimony could not neglect that of Peter already set down by St. Mark, so he used the second gospel. But his fidelity toward this source of the first order guarantees us that he has been no less prudent, and as the saying to-day is, less critical, in his enquiries from others, from those who had seen everything from the beginning and who were the ministers of the word.

From the beginning! What witness knew the beginning of the Gospel of which Jesus Christ was the subject? A single person, Mary his mother, whose consent God desired before accomplishing the work of good news. And when Luke twice emphasizes¹ that Mary kept all this in her heart—both words and facts—according to the comprehensive sense of Hebrew, is this not a delicate way of telling us that he is reproducing the confidences of Mary, perhaps already written by a very old friend among the chosen souls of Nazareth or of the family of Zachary?

It is therefore to St. Luke and through him to Mary that Dominican souls owe the five joyful Mysteries that they contemplate. Having once entered into contact with this writer so enlightened on these Mysteries they will recognize in the third Gospel the same moving and delicate touches which stir the heart and fill it with an immense hope in its Savior.

This is indeed fruit enough from reading these pages which have their source in a virgin soul. Should one add, not to satisfy mere literary taste as expressed by Renan who judged this little book exquisite, but to better understand its place in the sacred chariot of the Four, that Luke has resolved in the most felicitous way the problem of making the Greeks understand and appreciate a Jewish story without altering in any way its inviolable truth? Following a canon of elegance accepted among the partisans of the Attics, he does not go into details which appear superfluous, little worthy of great history. Hence he has followed and abbreviated Mark while lending a certain elegance to the forms of that unlettered peasant. Whenever a detail was too peculiar to Palestine he has somewhat transformed the image. We do not see in Luke a devastating torrent caused by a simple rainfall,²

¹ Luke 2:19; 2:51.

² Matthew 7:25; Luke 6:49.

rather it is a river which overflows. The rustic roofs of Galilee made of packed earth³ are furnished with tiles by Luke. Many other traits are characteristic to Luke such as the exclusion of certain words less elegant than others. Luke does not pride himself, as will later Victor Hugo, with having put on the same footing terms noble and plebeian.

Give yourself the pleasure, if you like, of pursuing these *minutiae*: you will get out of it at least this result that you will be convinced of the solidity of the fundamental matter, certified by the fact that the changes do not bear on the sense where Mark, for example, has brought it out under a more popular, and probably more primitive form, even when reporting the words of Jesus. The Master adapted with delicate condescension His teaching to the capacity of His listeners. His Evangelist has had the same indulgence for more delicate tastes.

The first three Gospels clearly announced, on the part of Jesus, and before His generation had passed away, the ruin of Jerusalem and the Temple. It is not, as the Jews of today like to say, that their ancestors were driven out of their country. Only access to Jerusalem was forbidden them: the cult of the God of Isreal on Mount Sion no longer existed while waiting to be replaced by that of Jupiter Capitoline. Sensible criticism affirms that the first three Gospels are previous to this capital event because nowhere do they give glory to Christ for the fulfilment of His prophecy: rather it is shrouded in the perspective of the end of the world. This floating perspective is one of the most difficult enigmas which you will encounter while reading the Gospel: it is, nevertheless, the most solid proof that the Gospels of Matthew, of Mark and of Luke are previous to the facts and emanate consequently from the generation to which Jesus belonged.

IV.—*The Gospel According to Saint John*

The destruction of the Temple was the end of living religion as regulated by the Law. The Law thus lost its fundamental object. The Jews who had been converted to Christianity, basing their hopes on redemption by an incarnate God knew that their religion was worth more than the olden rites. The Pharisees who had remained faithful to the Law could no longer see in it a living rule for the worship which could no longer be carried on in the ruined Temple. They transformed it into an object of study which they hemmed about, according to their own expression, with a hedge. They isolated

³ Mark 2:4; Luke 5:19.

themselves, barricaded themselves in. The controversy between Christians and Jews still goes on, but without making inroads into either party.

But the sower of cockle carries on his work in the field of the Church freed from Judaism. A heresy arose, that of Cerinthus, which exaggerated the break between the Old and the New Testament; it overshot the mark. Here is the fact, which it is difficult for us to understand. Such had been the brilliance of the miracles of Jesus, the foundation of Christianity itself seemed such a prodigious feat, that no Christian had dreamed of denying divine intervention, a manifestation of God, come down in person, as the prophets had foretold. Jesus of Nazareth had been the instrument of this revelation, but can humanity enter into a so close relation with divinity so that the same person may be at once a man and a God? Cerinthus denied it. Two beings had shared the role of the Savior, Jesus, born a Jew, had suffered, while Christ, supreme God, had used him to give men a sign of His active presence, after which He had again ascended into heaven. Jesus had only the appearance of God, the Word of God had not humiliated Himself in the flesh.

There still lived in Asia, in Ephesus, an immediate disciple of Jesus, the youngest, but yet the most loved, whose exquisite nature was more in harmony with that of Jesus, who was more fitted to understand with the heart a teaching which surpassed all knowledge. He was John, the son of Zebedee. The disciples were perturbed by the new errors and asked him to confide to them his memories of Jesus, and John wrote the Gospel of the Word. Yes, the Word is in God, the Word is God, the Word was made flesh. God has appeared, He has done his works among men, and under this head He is called Christ, a name which the prophets had bestowed upon him; He it is whom all Judaism awaited. Jesus of Nazareth is this Christ; and since He was a true man, the Christ is therefore the Word of God incarnate in Jesus. This is the first word of the Gospel of John, and it is also one of the last. This book has been written, he says: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name."⁴

If then the Dominican soul, reading this book pen in hand, considers it first of all solely as a supplement to the three others, if he notes the new things he find there, such as the wedding feast at Cana, the curing of the man born blind, the resurrection of Lazarus and many other passages, he will be justified in concluding that the Gospel

⁴ John 20: 31.

has grown in extension. But we already knew that Jesus had opened the eyes of blind men and raised the dead. Our student of the Gospel will detect that St. John attaches so little importance to one miracle more or less that he has narrated only seven, whereas in the other Gospels they are innumerable. Let him rather concentrate on understanding the saying of Clement of Alexandria, namely, that John has written a *spiritual Gospel!* In it everything is developed in depth, and this depth is that of God, Who lives in us by His grace. This mystery appears so surprising to Judaism that the learned Nicodemus shows himself no better prepared for it than the fisherman of Galilee: he does not grasp the revelation of a new birth, by water and the Spirit. The multiplication of the loaves had been related, and if perhaps we owe to John some few details more, what is this historical bread in comparison with the foreshadowing of the Eucharist, with the loyalty offered to the Word incarnate, or to the word of God which is the real food of the soul, with the anticipated vision of His body, given in spiritual food, and of His blood given in drink to the Christian? By resurrecting the young man of Naim, Jesus consoled a mother; before raising Lazarus He brought Martha to an act of faith in Himself, the Living One who resurrects the dead for eternal life. And what of the Samaritan woman who gives water to drink at the well of Jacob, and who receives in exchange the promise of that water which slakes thirst forever! And those friends of Jesus who are like branches of a vine which live by his Divine nourishment!

The good news of John is that salvation has already begun by the presence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in souls.

So much light for the intelligence, an attraction so powerful upon the heart, a charm which penetrates to the depth of the soul . . . all that is so beautiful, fulfills so perfectly the desire that God inspires in us of Himself, that reading St. John would be perfect happiness if such could exist here below. Perpetually restless, and as though it did not already have enemies enough, the human mind excels at torturing itself and at forging new difficulties to hinder itself. People have dared to reproach Saint John with being too lofty, too sublime in comparison with the first three Evangelists who manifestly set down the words of Jesus just as they were. Does not Saint John offer the Christians of his time, toward the end of the first century, the fruit of his meditations? Has he not projected into the past the clarity resulting from Christian experience? This is the question some reader will ask himself, driven to exaggerated negations by an unbridled spirit of criticism resolved to take no account of tradition. Instead of restricting itself to the young Galilean, a fisherman like

the rest, in the disciple whom Jesus loved, and to whom He opened his heart most intimately, this criticism seeks in the circles of Judaeo-Greek philosophies the author of theological speculations which are more in their place in a school than in a fishing boat, without stopping to think that fishermen are great dreamers.

The Church has held to the tradition which is quite solid since the beginning, and now it has been confirmed, at least as far as the date of the Gospel is concerned, by a fortunate discovery, since a papyrus, attributed to the beginning of the second century by the most independent authorities, proves the previous existence of the original during the epoch assigned by tradition.

Criticism had to go as far as the middle of the second century in order to have the time necessary for the evolution which it postulated.

As for the Palestinian origin of the accounts, this already seemed incontestable to Renan when he read the episode of the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well at the foot of Mount Garizim.

This Gospel which is so spiritual is also the one which is best acquainted with the theater where the action of Jesus took place. A more attentive criticism has recognized this without dispute. It has also established the sense of the fact which had been abused in order to deny the Joannine authenticity: namely, the shifting of the place of Jesus' preaching which is now Jerusalem as well as Galilee. The Apostles Peter, James, Andrew and the other Galileans had indeed seen persons evil-intentioned toward their Master appear on the shores of the lake, who strove to render His manner of acting suspect. But these spies no doubt had neither the mission nor the competence to engage Jesus in doctrinal discussions. This rôle was reserved to the wise men of the great schools of Jerusalem. It is precisely the author of the fourth Gospel, himself a disciple also, and the beloved disciple, who had been in relation with the priestly caste of the holy city. He was therefore better instructed than the others in the disputed questions, and he it is who reproduces these altercations of a superior intellectual order.

Still, we must be careful not to exaggerate. The words of the Savior in the Fourth Gospel touch the most profound mysteries. But they are detached sentences rather than formal compositions such as a Greek theoretician would have conceived; they are memories rather than an original creation. That those cut-up and breathless discussions were preserved in the Apostle's memory exactly as they had been pronounced, the Church does not oblige us to believe. The very fact that they were not complete gave them a particular physiognomy,

and John, who had often spoken to his disciples upon them, expressed them naturally, in a style which was his own. The thought was that of Jesus, rendered by the mouth of John. It is quite evident that the author is drawn to the contemplation of ideas. This penchant had doubtless always been dominant with him. It is this that rendered him particularly attentive to the profound meaning of the words and acts of Jesus. Peter acted, John thought. Thus, as it were, two aspects of the physiognomy of their common Master take shape. The first three Gospels reflect the preaching of Peter which was to be the first, the more opportune for the greater number, the more efficacious for convincing the Jews of having rejected their Messiah, the Savior of the world. John, who was moreover the particular friend of Peter, as may be seen by the Acts, takes up again the same theme while penetrating into the depths in order to confound the false sublimity of Cerinthus, and to reveal more clearly in Jesus the action of the Word of God, the person of the incarnate Word. Such a doctrine is the noblest of all, the most useful to souls; it sheds light on the presence in us of the three Divine Persons, it makes sensible fraternity with Jesus in the union of a divine paternity to which He gives us access. Is it not worth the efforts of those intelligence which have been rendered divine by it? Once we have disengaged the features of our Savior's life according to each Evangelist, shall we try to group them in a single image? We have already mentioned how dangerous this attempt is, because this or that fact or word has perhaps a different shade of meaning according to the purpose of the author, according to the context in which he has placed it. One should therefore maintain a prudent reserve; the essential point is that all the traits should agree in the friendship of the Man-God.

There is one point, however, which care for the historical method does not allow to be passed over, i.e. the sequence of events, chronology, that so important part of history.

Which Evangelist has adhered most closely to this order?

Formerly St. Matthew's Gospel, being the first and hence the best known, was commonly taken as the guide. Today one sees that its charm, and one can even say its partial superiority, lies in the linking-up of the words of Jesus, that special aspect prompted by the semitic spirit for teaching, or, as one says, for catechesis. Solitude for helping the memory often resulted in artificial combinations of ideas, which sacrificed somewhat the simple sequence of reality. At least it may be said that if Luke broke these admirable strings of pearls, it was not for the pleasure of scattering them, but in order to indicate the place and the time where they had appeared in their na-

tive brightness. Mark has not the characteristics of a logical composition and therefore does not inspire the same apprehension as Matthew. But the most ancient tradition, that of Papius, informs us that Mark gathered the catechesis of Peter as it was set forth following the circumstances of preaching rather than the exigencies of chronological order. His development of the life of Jesus is nevertheless so plausible that the author, doubtless consulting Peter in particular, has set forth the general outline of the life of Jesus according to the order of facts. Luke, who wishes to be historical, has undoubtedly checked on Mark and found him correct; in those accounts which are proper to himself he has striven to distribute the circumstances as they took place.

It still remains that on the capital point of the duration of the ministry of Jesus, the first three Gospels, while hinting that it was long, do not necessarily require more than a year to be assigned to it. It is St. John who constrains us. Yet there is still hesitation in his case. Although the duration of two years and a half seems almost certain to an ever-growing number of exegetes, many still hold for three years and a half.

It is of no little importance for the knowledge of the Gospel to distribute within the Joannine framework what are called periods, that is to say, sections which are more or less long and consecrated to a single fact, which may be a discourse. Do try! If you do not attain certitude as to the chronological order—in this you will be the first not to—you will have at least acquired a clearer view of the different perspectives and their convergence on that decisive moment when Jesus, already condemned in the mind of the religious chiefs, abandoned by his people, devotes himself principally to the formation of his disciples, and founds the Church.