

The Synoptic Problem: Some Unorthodox Solutions

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The expression 'synoptic orthodoxy' will be used in what follows to designate the view, first, that the authors of the first and third gospels both used the second gospel in a form very similar to that in which we have it; second, that they neither of them had access to the other's work, but both used a document consisting mainly of sayings of Christ (Q) as well as the second gospel; and third, that all the gospels were originally written in Greek, however much their language may have been coloured by the Semitic background of the authors or of the good news which they proclaimed. For the moment the first three gospels will be referred to respectively simply as 'Matthew', 'Mark' and 'Luke', without prejudice to the identity of their authors; a more complex terminology will have to be coined when the need arises.

It is often assumed that the synoptic problem is a matter of merely specialist interest, or at least that specialist knowledge is necessary for its intelligent discussion. Here one must distinguish between what may be discovered by actual examination of the texts, collation and comparison of the manuscripts on the one hand, and the arguments based on these discoveries on the other. The opinion, for instance, that the first two chapters of Luke are Hebrew in style, or that the last half of Acts is in more idiomatic Greek than the first, are obviously such as can be advanced and disputed only by specialists in the languages concerned. But the arguments from premisses derived from such specialist examination to some theory of the origins of the gospels and their influence upon one another, are in fact such as the non-specialist is able to understand; though the layman cannot test the premisses themselves (which he has to leave to the specialist) he is in a position to examine the proofs based upon them. How relevant the results of such studies are to the concerns of ordinary Christian people may be left for the moment as an open question.

The scientific study of the synoptic problem took a great step forward in the middle of the last century, when Lachmann¹ suggested that

¹In 1835.

the correspondences and differences between these gospels could most simply be accounted for on the hypothesis that Mark was the middle term between Matthew and Luke. Given this assumption, it is obvious that the relationship between the three may be set out in any one of the following ways ('X—→Y' means 'Y is directly dependent on X'):

(a) Matthew—→Mark—→Luke (b) Mark $\begin{cases} \rightarrow \text{Matthew} \\ \rightarrow \text{Luke} \end{cases}$

(c) Luke—→Mark—→Matthew. External and internal evidence both effectively rule out (c); I do not know whether anyone has ever seriously suggested it. That Mark is the link between Matthew and Luke is often assumed to entail that (b) is the correct solution; it will be called (following common usage) the theory of Marcan priority. The theory of Marcan priority has been called the one assured result of 150 years' diligent study of the synoptic problem; but there are still some, as will shortly appear, who can give good reasons for not accepting it.

Perhaps the most complete, clear, and closely argued presentation of synoptic orthodoxy is contained in Canon B. H. Streeter's *The Four Gospels*². Where Streeter went beyond his predecessors was in his treatment of Luke. Luke without the Marcan parallels made, Streeter felt, a complete work in itself. He concluded that the author of Luke had already prepared a complete gospel, from the document Q also used in Matthew and from other material, before Mark came into his hands. Another significant fact to which Streeter drew attention was that matter parallel to Mark occurs in large discrete chunks in Luke, while in Matthew the Marcan material is intricately fused with the rest. (It is often said that Matthew 'conflates' Mark, but this assumes the truth of the theory of Marcan priority; at the present juncture it is important to present the observable facts with the minimum of interpretation). This manner of treating Mark is clearly accounted for very well if the author of Luke wished to disturb as little as possible the substance of the work which he had already completed. Streeter's theory accounts also for the fact that where Luke differs from Mark in the parallel material, the differences are usually in matters of style (in which Luke is almost invariably an improvement on Mark), or the elimination of elements which might be found objectionable by Christians³. On Streeter's hypothesis, in fine, St Luke is what R. G.

²London 1924.

³Mark's 'He could do there no mighty work' (6.5) is parallel to Luke's 'He did there no mighty work'. And the ambiguity in Mark's story of the raising of Jairus' daughter (was she actually dead?) does not appear in Luke.

Collingwood called a 'scissors-and-paste historian', one who merely combines written sources, ironing out inconsistencies between them and presenting the whole in a unified literary style. Streeter assumed that Mark was used also by the author of Matthew, though in this case Mark was not used in separate sections, but worked into the rest of the material in a more uniform synthesis.

C. C. Torrey's *Our Translated Gospels*⁴ argues for the most radical of the solutions which I shall consider. Torrey held that Mark, Matthew and John were all written in Aramaic, and subsequently translated into Greek; and that the author of Luke was translating directly from Aramaic documents⁵. Not only did Torrey suggest many examples of mistranslation to indicate the Greek translators' misunderstanding of the Aramaic originals, but he published an English version of the gospels translated directly from these hypothetical originals⁶. The synoptic problem was not the only question of biblical scholarship in which Torrey proposed a solution which flew in the face of accepted theories, and all his solutions have commonly been either totally neglected or uncompromisingly attacked. Some writers⁷ acknowledge the brilliance of some of Torrey's particular observations, but urge that he has not sufficient evidence for such a radical break with accepted solutions. Now this objection raises some very wide issues on the proper relation of hypothesis to evidence in science. Karl Popper, in his *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, gives strong reason for thinking that hypotheses can in any case only be propounded by a kind of inspired guesswork, and that observable facts can never compel one to adopt a theory; once it is adopted, however, it may be *falsified* by observable facts. He recommends that as many hypotheses as possible should be tried out, and preference given to the ones which most readily suggest tests by which they might conceivably be falsified. On this account of the matter, Torrey has been attacked on the wrong grounds; rather than rebuking his temerity in suggesting a radically new hypothesis, his opponents should set themselves to working out the consequences of his theory for the facts which we are in a position to confirm, and indicating that they falsify it. Now it is commonplace for New Testament scholars to admit that there is a strong suggestion of an Aramaic background to the sayings of Christ in all the first three gospels and to the narrative

⁴New York 1933.

⁵p. ix.

⁶As a companion volume to *Our Translated Gospels*.

⁷e.g. Matthew Black in *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford 1954).

sections of Mark; but they usually state that this is accounted for either on the theory that the authors thought in Aramaic or that they were reproducing an Aramaic catechesis. Torrey's reply to the first is that John ch. 21 and Acts chs. 16-28 show clearly that the authors of the Greek gospels could write perfectly idiomatic Greek when they wanted to, and to the second, that Greek translations of available Aramaic originals can be shown to be similar in style to the gospels, which makes this rather curious theory about the psychology of the authors quite unnecessary⁸. Torrey explains the verbal coincidences in the Greek of the first three gospels by suggesting that each translator had the work of his predecessors before him, and used the same language as far as possible. This explains quite satisfactorily the grammatical improvements on Mark in the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. Luke does not follow Matthew in passages other than those referred to as 'Q' simply because the writer was trying to give a faithful translation of other documents.

For all his divergence from synoptic orthodoxy, Torrey accepts, in a sense, the priority of Mark. The Abbot of Downside argues for the priority of Matthew⁹. He remarks that critics have assumed too readily that the hypothesis that Mark is the link between Matthew and Luke is identical with, or leads necessarily to, the theory of Marcan priority. If in the work done by children in a classroom there is found to be a suspicious resemblance between the work of children A, B and C, but the hypothesis that C cribbed from A or A from C is found to be impossible, there is no need to jump to the conclusion that A and C both cribbed from B. B might have cribbed from A, and C from B. Besides the unanimous testimony of the Fathers that Matthew was written first, there is some internal evidence for this. Most striking is the existence in Matthew of idiomatic Semitic parallelism in passages parallel to Mark, of which Mark only contains fragments. If such cases really occur, it is surely more natural to suppose that Matthew preserves something closer to the original spoken word, and that Mark summarises it because the *nuance* of the Semitic style was lost in an alien language and environment, than that Matthew should have re-Semitted Mark's curt Greek summaries of what had originally been spoken in a Semitic language. The Abbot of Downside quotes very many instances of this, the cumulative evidence of which seems overwhelming. That other scholars have not seen the relevant passages as

⁸*op. cit.*, pp. 244, 249.

⁹*The Originality of St Matthew*, 1951.

wholes may be attributed to the effect of the Marcan hypothesis, which forces the critic to see in each passage a Matthean elaboration of a Marcan fragment. But this author does not really answer the objections to the hypothesis that Mark depends directly on Matthew. It is, for instance, impossible to convince oneself that the author of Mark deliberately distorted Matthew's grammar, or that Mark's rambling and circumstantial stories are literary elaborations of their marvellously compressed and polished Matthean equivalents. In short, it seems that both the hypothesis of the direct dependence of Matthew on Mark, and that of the direct dependence of Mark on Matthew, are open to very grave objections.

A solution to the problem which accounts for most of the difficulties was proposed by Pierson Parker in his *The Gospel Before Mark*¹⁰. Important among Parker's premisses are the following observations:

(1) The parts of Matthew which are peculiar to it (not shared with Mark or Luke) are fragments of such a kind that it is difficult to see how they could ever have had an independent existence.

(2) In the Marcan parallels to Matthean passages, where words of Christ are reported in a longer form in Matthew and a shorter in Mark, Mark has certain characteristic formulae ('He began to speak to them', 'And in his discourse he said to them').

(3) When Matthew is compared to those parts of the Septuagint which are translated from Aramaic (parts of Daniel and Ezra), marked similarities are found between them which strongly differentiate them from the rest of the Septuagint and New Testament.

(4) When the Q sections (the material common to Matthew and Luke which is not in Mark) are omitted from the text of Matthew, the remainder is found always to make good sense, and often the coherence of a passage is actually improved. Also a careful analysis of the Q passages reveals them as having a style of their own as against the rest of Matthew.

Assuming dependence of Matthew on Mark, it has to be held that the author of Matthew slipped in the material from his own sources in the very places where these rather curious expressions occur in Mark. The organic connection between the Marcan and at least some of the peculiar material in Matthew was also, as I said above, mentioned by

¹⁰Chicago 1953. This book seems to me to be of much underrated importance. I cannot help feeling that its neglect derives from the assumption that no author who does not accept the theory of Marcan priority is worth serious consideration.

the Abbot of Downside; yet these two writers, unlike the authors of Matthew, Mark and Luke, show no signs of having been influenced by one another's work. Each come to a very similar conclusion quite independently, and arguing from different premisses; their agreement is thus very impressive.

Parker's solution of the problem, which, he observes, accords much better with the patristic testimony than any other recent solution except that of the direct dependence of Mark on Matthew, is as follows: an Aramaic gospel consisting roughly of Mark and the material peculiar to Matthew (he refers to this gospel as K) was written in Palestine while St Peter and St Paul were preaching to the Diaspora and the Gentile world. When this gospel started being circulated in Rome, a Greek version (Mark) was produced which curtailed records of discourse which were full of Semitic repetition of a kind which would have been ineffective among Gentile converts, and omitted teaching (e.g. against the Pharisees) which would have been without point outside the Palestinian milieu, as well as some passages connected with St Peter, like his unsuccessful attempt to walk on the water, which seem to have reflected the bitterness of Jewish Christians that St Peter had deserted to the Gentile party. Thus the peculiar Marcan formulae are to be interpreted as signs of abbreviation. Greek Matthew, a compilation of the K gospel with Q and a very little editorial material (amounting to some twenty verses, which Parker maintains themselves have a characteristic vocabulary) was put about at a time when the Jew-Gentile controversy had died down. The author of Luke did not know Matthew; Parker's account of the compilation of Luke is much the same as that of synoptic orthodoxy.

The insuperable difficulties of the hypothesis that Mark depends on Matthew, and the almost equal difficulties (if the relevant observations of Pierson Parker are correct—and I know of no attempt to refute them) of Matthew's dependence on Mark, are both disposed of by this theory. The strong Aramaic colouring of the Marcan narratives and of many of the sayings of Christ recorded in all the synoptic gospels (which is admitted by most scholars who have a knowledge of Aramaic) seems adequately accounted for. Of the motives which Parker alleges for the omission by St Mark of passages in K, perhaps the preservation of St Peter's reputation is the least satisfactory. After all, the text which records our Lord's statement that he will build his church on the rock of St Peter occurs in Matthew only. Help at this point is provided by the theory of P. Carrington that Mark was written as a series of lections

for each Sunday of the year¹¹. Carrington makes the very natural assumption that the early Christian liturgy was modelled rather closely on that of the Synagogue. If the K hypothesis is accepted, Carrington's theory provides a very plausible reason for omissions which cannot be accounted for on other grounds¹². The passages of K which were neither irrelevant to Gentile needs nor compromising to St Peter may have been omitted simply because they were not specially suitable for liturgical purposes.

It may be worthwhile, as a sheer exercise in speculation if nothing else, to see whether any consistent theory can be outlined which combines as far as possible the positive insights of all these authors. Parker's hypothesis of an original Aramaic gospel, which there is no reason to think was not by St Matthew the apostle, fits in very neatly with the patristic witness from Papias onwards; it is consistent with the detailed account given by Streeter of St Luke's procedure with Mark, while improving on his less satisfactory account of the compilation of Matthew; it necessitates only a minor change in Torrey's theory, to the effect that the authors of (Greek) Mark and (Greek) Matthew were translating and revising a single Aramaic gospel, and gives substance to Torrey's judgment (which he never elaborates) that Mark shows signs of compression of the material on which it depends¹³; it accounts for that disjointed and episodic character of Mark which is the starting-point for form-criticism; it renders unnecessary the curious hypothesis that fragments of a Roman gospel about events in Palestine became nuclei of fresh Palestinian oral tradition. It makes it unnecessary either to cast aspersions on the honesty or intelligence of Papias or his informant or to propound the theory (implausible in itself and without any other foundation than the theory of Marcan priority) that all the subsequent patristic testimony depends solely on him.

¹¹ *A Primitive Christian Calendar*, 1952.

¹² Carrington himself adumbrates the hypothesis when he says (*op. cit.*, p. 61): 'A gospel very much like Mark must have existed in Syria before Mark arrived.' On the same page he cites Matthew 14. 12-13 as a passage parallel to Mark which seems to preserve a more authentic reminiscence than Mark. To admit this, and to account for it in terms of the theory of Marcan priority, would require a very complicated and implausible hypothesis.

¹³ *Our Translated Gospels*, p. 261: 'The Gospel of Mark differs decidedly from its fellows in that it seems to be an abridgment, a digest of material known to its author but utilised only in part.' This is specially interesting as independent confirmation of the existence of signs of editorial excisions in Mark admitted by one who did not hold that Mark abbreviated either Matthew or a more primitive version of it.

It may be asked why, if this theory is correct, it has not won more general acceptance among scholars. The answer is surely that the theory of Marcan priority is accepted so confidently that it conditions the way in which every particular relevant problem is formulated. The common critical expression 'Matthew here conflates Mark' is not an observed relationship between two documents, but depends on a theory of their origin¹⁴. I do not mean to assert that the theory of Marcan priority has been proved to be false, but only to suggest that it may be questioned. It is worth remembering that the history of science is littered with examples of the way in which the authority of a theory can act as a hindrance to further advance. Examples are the geocentric theory in astronomy and the phlogiston theory in chemistry. It might be asked whether there is any manuscript evidence which has a bearing on the problem one way or the other¹⁵. There are straws in the wind, of which I shall mention one. Origen says that in some 'very old' texts of Matthew that had come into his hands, Pilate was represented as asking the people whether they wished him to release *Jesus Barabbas* or *Jesus Christ*. Now it is generally agreed that it is vastly more likely that this effective though blasphemous-sounding antithesis stood in the original text, and was excised by pious Christian hands, than that Christian copyists inserted the first 'Jesus' by inadvertence or design¹⁶. Now this Matthean passage is directly parallel to Mark. On the Marcan hypothesis, it is necessary to postulate that the offensive phrase originally stood in Mark as well as in Matthew. For this there is not the smallest evidence.

I suggested above that this issue might not be quite irrelevant to the

¹⁴Torrey expresses doubt whether any writer ever went through such a procedure with regard to his sources as the authors of both Matthew and Luke are supposed to have done on the accepted theory (p. 261). Certainly this theory would be more plausible if convincing parallels could be adduced.

¹⁵Streeter says (*The Four Gospels* Vol. I, p. 500) that all the Fathers who give evidence *had read* Irenaeus, and that Irenaeus *had read* the dictum of Papias. Thus, he says, the whole patristic consensus can be traced to a single source. Surely the inference is rather that it is conceivable, though not very likely, that all the evidence is dependent on this source, than that it is probably or certainly so.

¹⁶Cf. A. Deissmann, *Mysterium Christi*, p. 21ff. Deissmann calls the offensive Matthean text 'a piece of primitive rock on which the historian can as confidently build as on any other tradition anywhere in the history of the world.' Soon afterwards he writes 'It happens that the Barabbas passage in Matthew depends on Mark. If therefore the original text of Matthew had *Jesus Barabbas* this double name was used also in Mark'.

concerns of ordinary Christians. As Parker says, on his own hypothesis, there was in existence at least by soon after the middle of the first century a gospel which contained accounts of the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ. The great majority of contemporary scholars date Mark between 60 and 70 A.D., and most prefer a date after 65¹⁷. Now elaboration of the kind which, on the theory of Marcan priority, Mark must have undergone before being incorporated into Matthew demands that Matthew cannot have been written long before the end of the first century—a date which Parker himself gives as the most likely one for the final Greek version. If Luke is not dated before 80, the notion that the birth and resurrection narratives are pious legend becomes much more plausible than it is on the K hypothesis.

It is probably untrue to say that the theory of Marcan priority has definitely been proved to be false. But the arguments which the authors I have mentioned have brought against it, and the theories which they have suggested to replace it, at least merit serious consideration.

¹⁷It is generally agreed that the present ending of Mark (16.9 ff) did not form part of the original text.

Penance and the Teacher¹

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The liturgy, or work, of the Church has two aspects under which, in the proper sense, we may regard it, and this because whilst Christ in his physical body was incarnate as a single man, in his ecclesial body he is in some indwelling sense incarnate in many men, and these men, 'the community of Christ's faithful', perforce act sometimes individually and sometimes corporately. But whether acting corporately or individually, they must, as members of the Church, manifest the work of the Church. The solemnization of the liturgy, enacted corporately

¹The substance of a paper read at the third conference on teaching children the liturgy; Spode House, Oct. 1962.