

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO THE GOSPELS¹

THE ALTERNATIVE TO Q

The modern counter to Q orthodoxy began with Farrer (1955), who held that the non-Markan passages which are common to Luke and Matthew are to be explained not by shared dependence on Q but simply by Luke's use of Matthew. Q therefore fails by Occam's Razor, the principle that 'entities are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary.' This has been the bone of contention ever since. Farrer's lead has since been followed by such as Goulder, Goodacre and Wenham.

Against it is the very different order of Matthaean material when it appears in Luke. Whereas Luke has clearly been working through Mark from beginning to end, his use of Matthew is far more jumbled. As a general principle, identity of order is considered strong evidence of a *literary* relationship between two documents, as against, say, oral tradition. So Luke's apparently haphazard use of material found in Matthew could be seen as evidence that he was not working from Matthew's text. To this can be replied that while Luke was working from a physical copy of Mark in front of him, his use of Matthew was from *memory*; so considerations of order are irrelevant.

(Incidentally, for Luke to have worked from two source scrolls while writing on a third, as the Q hypothesis maintains, in an age when there was no writing desk, would have been well nigh impossible. Consider handling three rolls of wallpaper at once!)

Verse by verse comparisons using parallel *synopses* prove little. See Parker (1997) who points out that in many cases we do not have a good enough text to be sure of any unique original: there has been too much assimilation between one gospel and another in the interim. And the variation in readings within a single gospel can often be greater than that between parallel readings of the same passage in different gospels. These documents have a *history* which cannot be swept aside.

On the other hand a very strong case for the priority of Mark can be made in terms of *pericope order*, and here the modern consensus is likely to be right.

¹ This paper summarises many of the arguments in Martin Mosse, *The Three Gospels: New Testament History Introduced by the Synoptic Problem* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).

THE CHALLENGE TO FORM CRITICISM

There is today the beginnings of a revolt against the form-critical paradigm of gospel formation which has held sway for decades. Not least, form criticism behaves as though gospel sections and sayings - pericopae - somehow evolved and were passed on orally in a vacuum, without identifiable *people* to pass them on, owing their shape to the communities whose needs they were supposed to serve. A strong challenge to this is posed by Richard Bauckham (2006), who like Earle Ellis (1999) sees the rounded, modular form which pericopae seem to have assumed by the time they were first recorded as the result of *frequent repetition by the eyewitness apostolic circle* in the very earliest years of the Church.

In addition, the reigning paradigm postulates with form criticism a long gap between the resurrection and the writing of the first gospels. So Mark is commonly dated just before or not long after the fall of Jerusalem in 70. This would be after the deaths of both Peter and Paul in Rome under Nero in c.67, and so at least 35 years after the crucifixion on 3 April 33. Q is then postulated (without a shred of historical support) to fill the gap. Matthew, Luke and John are then supposed to follow at ten year intervals (again, without any historical evidence beyond judgements of such things as the tone of Jesus' diatribes against the Pharisees, which are supposed to indicate a time when the Church and rabbinic Judaism were falling apart). Such dates are more comfortable for those who import an a priori and wholly unhistorical belief that Jesus could not have prophesied the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. They also suggest that plenty of forgetting and distortion could have crept in during the intervening forty year gap. So if we want to find the 'historical Jesus', we have to embark on a quest for Him as we certainly won't find more than a few traces in the gospels!

All this runs wholly counter to the powerful and unanimous witness of the early Church that Mark wrote from Rome which he first visited with Peter in the reign of Claudius (41-54). Since Claudius expelled 'the Jews' (whether all or just the prominent ones; see Acts 18:2) in 49/50, and both Peter and Mark appear to have been elsewhere in 46-49 (eg in Jerusalem Acts 12:25 (46) and 15:6 (Council of Jerusalem, late 48)), we can with Edmundson and his successors (Robinson (1976), qualified, and Wenham (1992)) place Mark's Gospel with some confidence c.45. Equally, there are passages in Matthew (27:8 and perhaps 28:15) which indicate that Jerusalem was still standing when they were penned. And as I have argued elsewhere, the complete failure of all three synoptics to distinguish Jesus' prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem from that of the end times is strong evidence that *by the time of writing neither had occurred*. Equally, from Hemer (1989), Moberly (1993) and many others there is an overwhelming case that Acts, which postdates Luke, was completed very soon after it ends in 62. This brackets all the synoptics between 45 and 62. This interval of just twelve years between the crucifixion and the penning of the first narrative gospel - less than the lifetime of the internet to date - removes the entire platform upon which form criticism rests. So if you are looking for the authentic

Jesus of Nazareth, you will find him first of all in the Gospel of Mark and those which followed it. A similar conclusion may be drawn from C.S. Lewis' literary-critical assault on Bultmann and his colleagues in his masterful posthumous essay, 'Fern-seed and Elephants' in the book of that name (1975); also from Sherwin-White's discussion of historiographic method in (1963, 186-93).

Thus we disagree entirely with the near unanimous view of the commentators who hold that Paul was writing his epistles long before Mark wrote his Gospel; or indeed that Mark did not write until Paul was actually dead. Certainly that is not what most of us would have concluded if we had in front of us Mark's breathless, rough-and-ready narrative on the one hand, and the sophistication of Paul's theology on the other. Equally, it follows from the conventional view that not one of the thousands of Christian martyrs who perished in the Neronian persecutions of 64-5 onwards had ever seen a gospel page or heard one preached from. Why did they bother?

Further, the model of Streeter's and others, according to which the gospels originated in four basically isolated communities with little contact between, is vitiated by the brilliant communications system which held together the Roman Empire. Consider the rapid traffic up and down the Egnatian Way across the north of Greece which is presupposed by Phil 2:19-30 and 4:14-19; the long list of Paul's personal friends in Rom 16:3-16 at a time when Paul had never even been to Rome; and the frequent movements between churches of Priscilla and Aquila: from Rome to Corinth (49-50, Acts 18:2); domiciled in Ephesus (52, Acts 18:26) still in Ephesus (55, 1 Cor 15:19); back in Rome (57; Romans 16:3); and finally in Ephesus again (66, 2 Tim 4:19). This would seem to undermine Streeter's conclusion that Matthew's Gospel originated in Antioch, for which he produces no historical evidence.

RELATIONSHIP OF JOHN TO THE SYNOPTICS

The early Church historian Eusebius tells us that

(1) John had access to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. He endorsed them 'but said there was only lacking to the narrative the account of what was done by Christ at first and at the beginning of his narrative.' (*Ecclesiastical History* III.xxix.7).

(2) He taught that Mark wrote 'accurately but not however in order' (*akribos ... ou mentoi taxeí*) (*EH* III.xxxix.15).

So John wrote in part to correct some false impressions given by Mark and his two successors. This accounts for many of the differences between John and the Synoptics. John was not writing from scratch. He assumed his readers would be familiar with his predecessors, and therefore does not go out of his way to repeat their stories (an exception is the feeding of the five thousand and the walking

on the water in chapter 6, which serves as representative of Jesus' Galilean ministry). Instead he deliberately concentrates on areas where he sees the Markan account as deficient.

Two areas stand out. First, the start of Jesus' ministry. Mark has Jesus bursting into Galilee, almost out of nowhere, preaching the good news, on the arrest of the Baptist (1:14). The same event in John (4:44-5) actually follows a highly successful preliminary mission to Jerusalem and Judaea of which Mark knows nothing. John's comment 'Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honour in his own country' (4:44 cf. Mk 6:4) is in my judgement an implicit criticism of Mark. Had Jesus actually begun His public ministry in Galilee - that is, His own home territory - as Mark would have it, He would have risked rejection and aborting his mission altogether. Instead, Jesus first makes His name in the south, returning home in triumph to Galilee as the 'local boy made good.'

Next, Mark, who we are expressly told (*EH* III.xxxix.15) had not himself followed Jesus, had in John's view a limited understanding of the chronological sequence of Jesus' ministry. This is hardly surprising given the Early Fathers' belief that Mark was recording the preaching of Peter in Rome. Peter will have spoken about individual episodes rather than sequentially. So it is left to John, who as an apostle had accompanied Jesus throughout His ministry, to supply the chronological skeleton, which he does by regularly identifying the feasts which Jesus attended in Jerusalem. Mark knows only of one visit by Jesus to Jerusalem, the final one which ended with His death and resurrection. So all the Jerusalem material about which Peter preached he crammed in there. On one point, as I see it (following Robinson(1984)), John corrects Mark: the cleansing of the Temple which Mark places at the start of Passion Week (11:12-19) but which John (2:12-22) reassigns to Jesus' initial mission of which Mark is unaware.

Lastly, the alleged discrepancy between John and the Synoptics over the day of the crucifixion seems to me to vanish if we assume that Jesus celebrated the Passover a day early, on Thursday evening. All accounts agree that He was crucified on the Friday, the Day of Preparation for the Passover, which itself fell that year (33) on the Sabbath.

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