

The Gospel of Mark

The following notes are very rudimentary indicators – read these subjects up.

The Two-Source Theory of Synoptic Composition

says that Mark's Gospel, "Mk", is the first to be written, and that it forms **the first source** employed – independently - by Mt and by Lk. This is what makes it possible for the three Gospels to be arranged side by side in columns.

Matthew and Luke then added **a second source**, a document of which they both had a copy. This was a collection of the sayings of Jesus. Mark did not have this source. The two evangelists who did use it in their different ways as a second source. It is called "Q" after the German word for "source", *quelle*.

There is further material, in Matthew but not Luke, and in Luke but not Matthew, which is drawn from written sources. These sources are referred to as "M" and "L".

Stages in Transmission of the Gospel

- Stage One is the original happening: Jesus meets someone, does something, responds to a question or a challenge, speaks, teaches, and so forth. This is what we would call *historical reality*.
- Stage Two is the remembering of this happening by people who were present, and its transmission to others who were not there. There's an intentionality involved here which can alter the details and form the presentation of the historical reality, turning it into a message (Gk *kerygma*). This is what we would call *oral tradition*.
- Stage Three is the formation of oral traditions into literary form, the work of the evangelist. This is potentially a very complex process, with genuine editorial and authorial activity involved. This is what we would call *Written Tradition*.

Do not overestimate the possibilities for stages 2 and 3. The average road-accident in an average busy street will provoke as many different accounts as there are "eye-witnesses" to ask. Three years (and a public enquiry) later, what chance will you have of recovering a "pure" stage 1 account?

Form Criticism

This technique of analysing the Gospel studies the literary form of each *pericope*¹ as it arises. The first task of the form-critic is to identify pericopes as separate. Forms present in the Gospel include narrative (stories), which can be further subdivided into miracle, controversy, parable, and so on; sayings, which can be single sentences, or several single sentences gathered together into a paragraph by the evangelist, or by stage two preachers and teachers: and then the framework of the Gospel itself can appear. At first this was regarded (eg by Schmidt) as mere string to hold the separate pericopes together. But more mature reflection (eg by Wrede) displayed an exceedingly *theological* scheme behind the arrangement of the pericopes. This realisation enabled Wrede to prove that Mark's arrangement of his source-material, far from being based in *historical sequence* (i.e., Stage One history) is based instead on his *theological* understanding (Stage Three) – in fact, that Mark is acting as a true *author*, and not just a reporter of facts armed with historical memory, a pair of scissors, and a pot of paste.

¹ "pericope" is the term for a chunk of written tradition.

In examining the contribution of Stage Two, form critics came to see that the saving of Gospel material demands a link with a specific activity in the early Church – a life-situation (German *sitz im Leben*) which can explain why a particular saying or story was saved and how it was used by preachers and leaders within the Church. This theory tended to diminish the rôle allotted to the evangelists, seeing the formation of the material as being largely second-stage: for instance, conflict-dialogues between Jesus and lawyers or Pharisees come to be seen as formed principally by arguments between Christians and Jews in the early-church *sitz im leben*; the evangelist then has simply to report the contest, setting the views of the Church on the lips of Jesus, and thus giving dominical warranty for the Church's position. Mk 2:23-28 would be a good example. Note that it is the disciples who are accused, not Jesus himself; form-critics suggest that "disciples" means "early Christians", that "Pharisees" means "opponents of the Church", and "Jesus" steps in to defend his own. The sayings about the Sabbath attributed to Jesus may have been said by the historical Jesus (*stage 1*), but on a different occasion; thus the formula, "*and he said*" which might imply an independent origin for the saying.

Redaction Criticism This focuses on the elements considered as secondary by the form critics – the string that threads the pearls, the structure that orders the pericopes. The work of the evangelist in assembling and combining the sources is not a neutral or random task, but a planned and designed piece of theological authorship. How did the evangelist respond faithfully to his sources – thus keeping faith with the tradition – whilst still addressing the real situation in his Church at the time of writing – thus keeping faith with his readers? The voyage of discovery is not confined to the single task of illuminating the mind of the evangelist, but involves investigation of the prevailing conditions within the local church, whose life he has been serving. Much of this may be conjectural work, and it is far from easy to be just and accurate. We ought to remember that principle of the Second Vatican Council, that the primary meaning of the Scripture – that is, its meaning as Word of God – is *the meaning in the mind of the author* at the time of writing.

An interesting exercise would be to examine the way in which *the miraculous draught of fishes* functions in its two appearances: before the call of Peter (Lk 5) and as the prelude to meeting the risen Christ (Jn 21). The pericope is recognisably the same story, but its placing and voicing differs. A fundamentalist, believing that the Gospels are arranged *historically*, would have to conclude that the incident, being described twice, must have happened twice; a redaction-critic, assuming a *theological* arrangement, would ask: *why has the evangelist, in each case, put the story here?* (The fundamentalist might be asked why the disciples in John's account don't seem to remember anything like this happening before: cf the multiplications of loaves).