

Synoptic Gospels

NB *The delivery of this lecture requires the accompaniment of the first volume of Davies and Allison's International Critical Commentary on Matthew. The Synoptic parallels will also be of use.*

The movement from studying the Gospel of Mark to the studying of the Synoptic Gospels is a significant one. Recalling that Mk is the first source of Mt and Lk, we turn to our Gospel Parallels (I know that this is something you have already done with Fr Michael) and set ourselves to notice the shift in emphasis, method, and aim displayed by these new writers. It may be worthwhile to lay down some preliminary suggestions about what we shall find.

Matthew

Modern criticism, turning wearily from the endless speculations of the form-, redaction-, historical-critical schools, has suggested a new type of criticism, pure literary criticism, which simply lets the text speak for itself. The great question asked by this school is: *what does the text say, never mind how it comes to say it?* Positively, the position of this school is: *The best interpreter of Matthew is Matthew himself*; negatively however, it seems that there is a certain despair in this route, and I don't propose it to you in isolation. We need a judicious blend of methods, accepting whatever they have to tell us about the Gospel, its writer, and the community, and wider world, in which he worked. What can we say about Matthew, when we read his work where it was composed, beside Mark's?

The first, vital thing to be said is "The ancient Jewish sources...put into the interpreter's hands the most important tool with which to fathom the First Gospel" (*Davies and Allison*). Matthew's relationship with the Jewish religious world is hugely significant. Therefore, when we find Jewish issues and questions predominating in his presentation of Jesus, this Gospel has a unique gift to give us, since it was precisely in the Jewish context that the real life of Jesus unfolded. What we know from our understanding of the OT is therefore cardinally important for our understanding here.

Close examination of the use of the OT in Mt and Lk reveals that whilst both seem to be quoting the OT from their sources, Luke has a habit of cutting short citations, and there is nothing quoted in Lk which does not also appear in Mt and which may have come to both of them through "Q". Mt appears to be much more creative, quoting the whole of textual passages, and adding citations of his own: "it is clear that he knew and treasured the OT in a way Luke apparently did not." (*D & A. These authors present very cogent arguments for the conclusion that Matthew was a Jew writing for Jews*).

Perhaps I should fire a volley across the bows of any nascent Griesbachers among you (people advocating the primacy of Matthew over Mark). Papias suggests that Matthew wrote an ordered account of the Lord's oracles in Hebrew (or maybe he meant Aramaic). But our present Mt is in Greek, and shows very little sign at all of being a translation. It is inconceivable that a Semitic document, like the one Papias suggests, would have incorporated the whole of a Greek document (our Mk) almost in its entirety. Finally, it is beyond belief that an apostle who had accompanied Jesus would have allowed a Greek gospel of Mark to determine the order of his material.

We only have the allegations of Papias in the testimony of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesaria (260-340), and Eusebius, remember, also tells us that Papias was a man of little intelligence.

Here are a few comments on what Matthew does to his Markan material.

1. He drops details (eg 9:18-26 – Jairus/haemorrhage; cf Mk 5:21ff)
2. He amplifies discourses by adding material from other sources (cf Mt13/Mk4, the Parables)
3. He alters Markan order up to Mt 14:1 = Mk 6:14, after which the two follow the same sequence.
4. He lessens reference to Jesus' emotion and ignorance (cf *D&A pp104ff*)
5. He omits sayings and incidents he doesn't understand (Mk 9:49f, "salted with fire"; 14:51f, the flight of a naked young man)
6. He eliminates odd turns of phrase typical of Mark (e.g. *euthus* – "immediately", use of the historic present, double negatives and redundancies)
7. He has different favourite words and expressions (*D&A pp 74ff*)
8. He thinks in Hebrew forms ("Semitisms") as easily as Greek (*D&A pp 80-85*)
9. He has a Jewish love for regulation based on numbers (*D&A pp 86f*)

What Is The Impact Of "Q"?

"Q" refers to the second shared tradition, non-Markan material common to Mt and Lk. This involves roughly two hundred and thirty verses. Sometimes Mt gives us the most original form of a saying, sometimes Lk; this militates against the theory that one of them knew and used the other as a source.

With the exception of the words of John the Baptist and the temptation stories, Matthew and Luke do not agree in the placement of their common material into the Markan framework; this surely would be much less true if one of them knew and used the other as a source.

We have already sustained the theory that Matthew and Luke had common recourse to the conjectured document "Q" which delivered to them a substantial source of the Sayings of Jesus. It must be a document, because oral tradition is insufficient to account for the word-for-word correspondence in much of the material (*D&A p 116*). It also has several factors which characterise it as a document. There are characteristic forms: the beatitude, the woe, the prophetic threat; it uses characteristic vocabulary, and it follows the Deuteronomistic interpretation of history¹. Of course scholars do not all agree on their suggested reconstructions of the document, and it is perfectly proper to assume that "Q" was originally written either in Hebrew or in Aramaic; but if it was, that Matthew and Luke must have used the same translation into Greek, in order to have produced their great similarities. But there is nothing to suggest that its text, in a pre-Gutenberg age, was set in concrete; it could be that the two evangelists used slightly different versions. If the oral traditions about Jesus were still current and forming and reforming, then no doubt additions and alterations were constantly being made. When there are texts in both Gospels which are assigned to "Q" but display differences not attributable to the known editorial policies of the evangelists, it is possible to invoke different recensions of "Q" to explain them.

¹ Briefly, Deuteronomy emphasises Israel's persistent disobedience, God's sending of the prophets, Israel's rejection of them; God's punishment of Israel, the call to repentance, the promise of redemption for Israel and of the punishment of her enemies.

We can neither date “Q” (although it obviously must predate both Mt and Lk) nor suggest any particular place for its composition.

A Note on “M”: When you have eliminated the text of Mark and what is clearly shared with Luke (i.e., broadly, “Q”) there remains a residue of material which is fairly extensive. This material is grouped under the title “M”, but there is no need to postulate a separate source, or to suggest that this material ever existed as an independent document with its own literary form, or intentionality. So the letter M is used to group everything that comes to Matthew from a plurality of sources, oral or written. There are some groupings in the material which seem to suggest themselves: a collection of ten parables, most of them specifically “of the Kingdom of Heaven”; there is also a very close similarity between Mt 6 1-18 and 23:1-22, suggesting a strongly anti-Pharisaic source instructing Matthew’s Christians on the difference between them and the unbelieving members of the synagogues.



It is perhaps in studying the effective use each Evangelist makes of “Q”, to weave the contents of this source into Mark’s basic narrative, that we can isolate the special qualities of Matthew and of Luke. This is a question of redaction criticism. Perhaps the first method would be to look at the overall plan of the finished Gospel, eliciting from it the way in which Matthew presents his subject.

The first thing to notice about Matthew is his very palpable scheme for the conveyance into the Marcan framework of the “Q” material. As we look at this material, we soon perceive a serial pattern. Leaving aside the rather clearly-delineated birth-narrative, we can start at Mt 3. From here until Mt 25 we can discern a clear rhythm of large masses of teaching, each preceded by a narrative section. These collections of sayings can be thought of as sermons:

- the *Sermon on the Mount* deals with the relation between the Old Testament and the Christian future;
- the *Apostolic discourse* follows, then
- the *discourse of parables* of the kingdom;
- fourth is the *discourse on the Church*, and finally
- the *eschatological discourse* which deals with the end of time.

After that comes the Passion Narrative. By beginning with a discourse whose theme is the Law, delivered on a mountain, Matthew is making it plain that he is evoking Moses, who delivered the Law on a mountain, in his presentation of Jesus. The five great bodies of discourse, furthermore, recall the Pentateuch, or “five scrolls” of the Jewish law (the first five books of the Bible) traditionally ascribed to Moses.² So we can say that Mt is presenting a Christian Torah. We have already noted the special relationship between Matthew and the Old Testament, so it is not difficult for us to accept that Matthew’s approach to Jesus is thoroughly Jewish, more so than either of the other Synoptics. Mark reflects his Gentile readership, by his careful explanation of Jewish custom; Luke his, by his sensitivity to the Gentiles who cross Jesus’ path,

² It is worth acquiring the awareness that when traditional writers refer to “Moses” they mean “the Torah”, just as those who allude to “David” are really quoting from the Psalms.

and the overall destination of his writing: namely, the mission to the Gentiles as outlined in the Acts of the Apostles.

It has often been suggested lately that Matthew is so totally aware of his Jewish material that he could be taken for a convert Rabbi.³ This is of some importance, especially in deciding on the date of the Gospel; because Matthew shows a distinct awareness of the concerns displayed by the so-called Assembly of Jamnia, a conjectured body of religious teachers which formed there⁴ after the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and which may have tried to take the place formerly accorded to the Sanhedrin. The Assembly is said to have discussed the canonicity of certain books (like Ecclesiasticus or the Song of Songs).⁵ If the author of Mt had been a Jewish Rabbi, this would ground his understanding of rabbinic argument and concerns.

The question of our relationship to the Jewish faith arises with peculiar sharpness when we study Mt, because here we are seeing the proclamation of Jesus, in the third quarter of the first century, in a predominantly Jewish environment. We are bound to register the fact that Jesus' entire earthly career took place within the overall envelope of the Jewish religion and nation; he was born a Jew and died a Jew, and the object of his address, and the address of his apostles, was *to the Israelites alone* until the final lines of the Gospel in the post-Resurrectional mission to "all nations". In many places within the Gospel we can hear his message couched very much within the terms of Jewish practice: for example, "leave your offering there before the altar, and be reconciled first" can only be understood by those offering the sacrifices of the Old Law in the Jerusalem Temple, probably already demolished when the Gospel was written down.

Recent study of St Paul has opened up the questions about his own adherence to Jewish practice, as it shows itself on his visits to Jerusalem; his own account of his so-called "conversion" differs greatly from the account laid on his lips in the Lukan *Acts of the Apostles*, and in Galatians and Romans we find him, far from resolved and tidy, but rather agonising about how to understand the change he has gone through in his relationship with the faith of his fathers. Mt can be read in the same way, acknowledging the delicacy of the Church's evolving attitude to its own undeniably Jewish roots. That this relationship has over the ages deteriorated to the point where the Church of Christ becomes the cradle of anti-Semitism is one of the great religious tragedies; but the green shoots of this situation are perfectly visible in the writings of the New Testament, most clearly in the noble setting of the Fourth Gospel, but equally certainly in the denunciation of Rabbi and Pharisee in Mt.

Luke

It will be as well to introduce at this point the subject of Luke, the lone Gentile amongst the Evangelists. In noting that he is Gentile, we should also note that he is a citizen of the Greek-speaking world, that he is racially not a Jew, and that in his Gospel he addresses a world of non-Jews; and he shows this in countless ways throughout his work. Few of us are, or will ever be, sufficient scholars to know much about Greek style. Those competent to judge, however, are very clear that Luke, more than any other NT writer, displays his facility not only in the world of the

³ Not, therefore, so very different from Paul.

⁴ 13 miles S of Joppa

⁵ Although the suggestion that a particular Synod of Jamnia, allegedly held c. AD 100, finally settled the OT Canon (theory of H E Ryle) has, despite wide currency, never been supported by any evidence

Gospel tradition, and its Koinē Greek, and also in the broader world of the Septuagint, a Greek formed in the mould of the original Hebrew texts of the OT, but in the literary world of Graeco-Roman civilisation, whose periods and vocabulary are clearly well-known to this writer. It suffices to say that Luke is an historian, an orator, a stylist showing wide-ranging skill in different literary forms, and a superb storyteller, whose literary artistry is more clearly marked than that of any other NT writer.

We must never forget how desperately we are limited in our understanding of Scripture by the inability to read and appreciate Hebrew and Greek. But even in our translated contact with Scripture, we can easily appreciate the difference between Mark's fragmentary parables, and the stately narrative style of Luke's, shown in the Prodigal Son and Good Samaritan. The Marcan parables are shot from the hip in the market place; Luke's by comparison read like short stories. Mark's have all the immediacy of the oral tradition. Luke's reek of the study, of reflection, and of pen and parchment; in short, he is a literary mover of a different order from Mark.

The differing cultural atmosphere of the Gospels allows critics to suggest new literary parallels for Luke, based in the forms of classical literature. Certainly Luke would have had little reason or inclination to echo Jewish scriptural forms, if he and his readership were less knowledgeable about them. So the elegant form of the address at the beginning of the Gospel is likened to similar prologues within the classical world: the tonality of the first part of Luke's work has been likened ancient history-writing, and to biographies of famous personages in the ancient world. It is too much to say that Luke belongs to a different tradition from the other Synoptics: but the influence of pagan literature is exceedingly clear in his writing. The historians Polybius and Posidonius wrote historical works alleging that the Pax Romana was a special work of divine providence, and Josephus speaks of the Jewish War as "the greatest that ever broke out between nations"; this is clearly not far from the lukan realisation that the story of Jesus is the most important of all stories, and the religious character of his message is not in any way contradictory to his writing a valid piece of history as it was then understood.

It seems very clear that the two works - Luke and Acts - are really one work, and increasingly they are treated together by scholars. This is of great importance, since there is a specifically Lukan dimension to be observed. All the Gospels try, in their own way, to bear witness to the eschatological dimension of the story they recount. In other words, from Mark onwards, each Evangelist is tying the events of Jesus' life to the end of the world, the last days. Luke does this most specifically, since he spends much time chronicling the years after the climactic events of the first Easter: a time when, according to the kerygma, the last days had begun, but which, in Christian experience, saw the world still unconsummated by the second coming and the judgment of all history. Luke's special contribution to the Synoptic picture of the Church is his confrontation of this paradox, and his revoicing of the kerygma in the light of it. He sees the history of the world in three great eras: the pre-Christian time of preparation and prophecy, the central period of the Incarnation, and the third epoch, that of the Church, which extends the Incarnation into subsequent history.

The interpretation of all history as dominated by the salvation-plan of God had to be voiced in terms of actual happenings, and this is the sense in which Luke sees himself as historian; his is a theological history. The declaration of the primacy of God over all could have been expressed in theoretic language like that of Paul's letters, or in the terms of apocalypse, where what is narrated is historically impenetrable. Luke's mode ties him to the Western understanding which would emerge from the pagan past into the European culture we have inherited. It is perhaps in this affinity with what would

become our mental world that Luke the Gentile, Luke the Greek, makes his definitive contribution to the tradition.

His mode of expressing the virginal conception of Jesus can be compared to that of Matthew, and immediately we see a miracle that is described, rather than simply being referred to. That a named archangel should appear in broad daylight, as opposed to vision or dream, is typical of Luke. The Spirit descends on the baptised Jesus *in bodily form, like a dove*; the transfiguration is described in physical terms, as are Moses and Elijah, whose conversation is recorded; the watching disciples really enter into a cloud. The darkness at Calvary is explained as the result of an eclipse; the risen body of the Lord is actual and physical as nowhere else. The wind and the flames of Pentecost, the shaking of houses, the gift of tongues - there is an actuality in these Lukan matters which addresses our need for historical material in our belief.

In relation to the Old Testament, like all other early Christian writers, Luke considers himself free to fish for prediction and reference throughout his telling of the Gospel. Unlike Matthew, who solemnly quotes passages from ancient texts, Luke seeks to echo the words of the past, so that a trained ear can immediately relate the Gospel to what precedes it. A good example is the birth narrative in Luke's first two chapters, where the style of writing consciously evokes the Old Testament and where the imagery and metaphor of the Jewish past are present in every line. Some of this content may already have been present in the L traditions which he peculiarly received from others; but it is strongly to be suspected that his own method of thought was most adapted to this sophisticated way of situating his narrative in the world where the God of Israel is personally involved with men and women.

In the sermons of the Acts of the Apostles Luke finds a natural way to quote huge batteries of OT material unedited; these concentrate particularly on Luke's favourite meditations on Jesus as the Davidic heir to the messianic promises.

Apart from these places, we usually find the presence of citation from the OT coming to Luke through the sources, for instance from Mark, where he copies without alteration what Mark delivers to him. Conspicuously clear, though, is the first sermon of Jesus at Nazara in Lk 4, and the two instances of post-resurrection instruction of the disciples on the road to Emmaus and the Eleven assembled together: here Jesus identifies *all* the passages throughout the whole Bible that speak of himself. Implied here is the role of Jesus as the one true interpreter of Scripture, and of his Passion, death, and resurrection as the ultimate meaning of all that has passed between God and man.

Finally we might note a specifically Lukan moment (Lk 22:37):

I tell you, these words of Scripture have to be fulfilled in me: *He let himself be taken for a criminal*. Yes, what Scripture says about me is even now reaching its fulfilment.

This is the only explicit biblical citation in the whole of his passion narrative, and it is unique to Luke. It serves to set the oncoming arrest of Jesus into the divine plan; but it refers forward to cover the whole passion as Luke understands it.

The remarkable difference between the tonalities given to the three Synoptic Passion Narratives deserves the most careful study, especially in the light of the future tasks of preaching which may fall into the Deacon's path.

If time allows, a brief discussion might follow on the perceived difference between the three accounts.