

# MARK

**TODAY AS A LOVELY SURPRISE** we are going to begin the study of the New Testament. We still have much to cover from the Old, but as the most conspicuous area still to be covered is that of *apocalyptic*, and the New Testament is rich in apocalyptic areas, we shall benefit from the study of that literary form in a Bible-wide context.

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## THE FIRST OF THE GOSPELS

There is great controversy about the literary form of the Gospels and how we should think of their genesis. This may at first strike you as yet another of those barren controversies among scholars which delay you from the work that might help you as eventual deacons in parishes. As usual, you are invited to think again.

One of the factors which this consideration of literary form clarifies is the precise modality in which truth is being conveyed. We have already seen that the clearer varieties of literary form already carry with them a quite specific understanding of their own way of communicating truth: for instance, *the Lord is my shepherd*, but then again the Lord is not a shepherd in most senses of the word, and in most senses of the word I am not a sheep (that is understood as soon as we recognise that we are speaking poetically). It is in these ways that we must ask the question: what value do we give to the statements of the Gospels? We know quite a lot of difficult factors about them that have to be taken into account. Here are a few things we already know:

***The Gospels contrast heavily in terms of the importance they give to their contents.***

The Gospel of Mark, like that of John, tells us nothing of the birth of Jesus, its location, the details of his family background. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke independently spend a long time telling stories to cover precisely these areas. What importance are we to give to these parts of the story, since two evangelists do not think them worth addressing at all?

***The Gospels contradict one another in matters of fact.*** The first three Gospels say clearly that Jesus' death was triggered by his deed of entering Jerusalem as a royal Messiah, and coming to the Temple to purify it. The fourth Gospel tells us that this Temple deed took place three years before his death. Even the Gospels which tell the birth-stories do so in quite different, almost certainly contradictory, terms.

***The Gospels contain errors.*** Gospel truth is a far less simple concept than many Protestants have been led to believe. In factual matters the Gospels frequently err, and in some statements we would consider central there is latitude, conflict, even contradiction among them as to the facts of the matter. For instance, was the Last Supper the Passover meal (*Mark, Matthew, Luke*) or supper the night before the Passover (*John*)? What does the Church understand about this matter? Many authorities and Church fathers assume that the three Synoptics have the history correct, often proceeding on a majority vote.

Archaeology, however, forbids us to contemplate the priests holding a trial by night, the priests engaging with Pilate in dialogue on the afternoon of Passover, or the burial of Jesus' body as the sun was setting on Passover. Therefore the Synoptic Gospels are overruled by *external*, certain historical fact; having registered this, we can immediately see that the Fourth Gospel has great *internal* credibility (the anxieties of the leaders, the hurried burial, and so forth - which become immediately comprehensible in a new way if the day of the trial and crucifixion is altered).

The Gospels are thus hardly going to hold a lot of water as historical record. In many ways the concept of historical record is a modern one; the idea of *impartiality* would be unlikely to occur to ancient authors, most of whom would assume that if an author were impartial towards his subject, he would never come to accept the arduous business of writing at all. But we do not come to the gospels indifferent to historical truth. We have to weigh the sense in which they tell historical truth, if there is one, and in what way they are historically reliable. That is as much as to say that our recognition of their literary form is an essential preliminary to our receiving them as authoritative. All the more as *proclaimers* of the Gospels, we should have a really precise idea of their claim to truth, its bounds and limits.

## THE LITERARY FORM OF THE GOSPELS

We inherit a certain amount of backwash in the criticism of the Gospels. The inevitable haunting of the scene by that extraordinary old Bishop, Papias of Hierapolis continues to perfume and misdirect the whole scene. It is regarded as arcane knowledge, and therefore certainty, that the Gospel of Mark was

- a recension of a previous Gospel of Matthew - for centuries equated with our Matthew, but (in the wake of textual onslaughts in this century) replaced with a previous Greek, or even more previous Aramaic Matthew which has become unaccountably lost to us.
- written by the John Mark who is mentioned at various points in the New Testament,
- who was (as Papias says) the *hermeneutes*, which is secretary, amanuensis, interpreter of the Apostle Peter: such that we are receiving, in the Gospel, an account of the preaching of Peter, with the authority of Peter behind it.

The longing of people to name the author of the Gospel and its fellows can only be regarded as perverse since, in every case, the actual evangelists, despite being well able to write, resist the temptation to append their signatures. The romantic conjecture that the young man who runs away naked in the garden of Gethsemane is the author of the Gospel is precisely as empty a speculation, and gives just about as much real knowledge of who the author is, as the ramblings of Papias. Despite this ignorance, however, we shall adopt the practice of referring to the Gospel as "Mark", written "Mk", so as to avoid any confusion caused by phrases like "the first Gospel", which once referred exclusively to Matt. Papias himself blames his analysis on "an elder" - whose veracity and authority remain conjectural; modern scholarship, by contrast, has revealed that the contents of the first Gospel, whatever their provenance, must have a plurality of sources, and therefore cannot proceed from a single eye-witness. This gives the death-blow to two attractive possibilities: first, that of having a window into the mind of the leader of the Apostles, secondly, that of having a "hot line" to the eye-witness level of the tradition, at only one remove (that of Mark the secretary). The handing-down of the tradition is much more complex than this, and the truths revealed

by scholarship only occasionally gratify the best ideas of those who are watching from the sidelines; this is why theologians and bishops so often find themselves at odds.

The positive value that has come from all this apparently disappointing speculation is the recognition that Mark has a very precise programme of thought, and that the Gospel, if not governed and sourced by the simplicity of eye-witness, is actually a window on to the thought and perception of an early Church; here we are receiving not only elements of tradition, but the lively concerns of a community, its way of remembering and reflecting, the whole treatment of the oral tradition in preaching and in the evolution of theology.

There is one area where received wisdom appears to be supportable: that is the possible location of the Gospel in Rome. This has the support of the presence in the Gospel of Latin words: the bushel under which the lamp is not to be hidden (*modios*), the *legion* which gives its name to the demon of Gadara. John the Baptist's head is removed by a *specoulator*, while the disciples offer to buy bread with 200 *denarii*, the jug the Jews scrub to kasher it is a *sextarius*, the tribute to Caesar is called a *census*, the condemned Jesus is given over to be *flagellatus*, the crucifixion is supervised by a *centurion*. The widow's mite is 2 lepta, *which is a quadrans*; Jesus is taken into Pilate's court, *that is, his praetorium*. The evidence is not overwhelming, and the presence of the Roman Army could have made these equivalents current in many cities of near East of the time. As to the time, the ambiguity of the mention of the Temple's destruction seems to leave open the possibility that this had not yet been verified, and there is often an argument for a dating before or about 70 CE.

So much for Papias. There is a great question about the form of the Gospel: did Mark *invent* the literary form we are examining? As we have seen, the Gospels do not have an ordinary relationship with historical reportage, even such as was current in the Empire or in Jewish literature at the time. The indifference of Mark and John about birth narrative means that we are unable to identify the Gospels as simple biography. They are, therefore, presenting the life of Jesus in narrative form, but the intention is not historical and not merely celebratory.

The question was sharpened by the correction of the Papias-led view of the Church Fathers - viz., that Matthew preceded Mark, and that Mark was thus to be understood as an attentive successor and abbreviator of Mark (this view held with authority by Augustine). In the eighteenth century scholars were increasingly questioning this view, and gradually the textual scholarship established in primacy the view that Mark represents a source common to Matthew and Luke; the further identification of a common source in Matthew and Luke (but not Mark) labelled "Q" - the so-called "Two-Document" theory - and then further separate sources restricted to Matthew or Luke was largely accepted and still is by most scholars. The contrary theory - that Matthew came first and that Mark is a reduced form of it - is now referred to as "the Griesbach hypothesis" and is espoused by a few marginal Luddites.

This solution leaves Mark exposed as the inventor of the literary *genre* we call a Gospel today. It resulted in a huge outpouring of interest in Mark, since many excited commentators seized eagerly on the thought that the oldest Gospel must also be the most primitive, and therefore give the most unvarnished truth about Jesus as he was in history.

These hopes also were destined to be dashed, however, and the death-blow was administered in 1901 when William Wrede published the book translated into English as *The Messianic Secret*; he identified the apparent simplicity of the Gospel of Mark as a carefully-orchestrated piece of theological writing based on the motif of Jesus' secret identity and destiny, concealed alike from disciples and opponents; this is presented in the setting of a cosmic struggle between good and evil, embodied in demons: these are the only figures in

the story who know the truth about Jesus and voice it; Jesus silences them, and equally forbids those who have been in their power and who become recipients of his miracles from publishing their news; his messiahship is to be revealed only in his death, and this is the hypothesis which explains all the other oddities in the narrative. Maybe Wrede does not go unquestioned today; but his imposition of a *theological* plan on the apparent naiveté of the Gospel revolutionised its criticism from then on.

The contribution of the form critics, especially in the inter-war years (Bultmann/Dibelius) is not to be belittled. They recognised the nature of the Gospel as a series of beads (pericopae) which the evangelist receives from the tradition and threads onto a framework of his own devising; thus he composes the Gospel we eventually see. Of course, the tendency of this analysis is to diminish the evangelist to a threader of already-determined materials - in short, a scissors-and-paste-merchant. Call him by the grander title of an editor, and there is room for more manoeuvre; but the recognition that some of the elements - especially the more difficult elements - in the completed Gospel may take their origin from the difficulty of the materials the evangelists inherited is a useful one.

These critics went on to attempt to discern the *sitz-im-leben* of the different pericopae - answering the question: *Why did the Church save this one? What does this story or saying reflect from the history of the early Church?* Immediately we sense the influence of the evangelist in quite a new way. The fascinating task of comparing the Gospels across the page of a Synopsis can now begin to reveal the theological aims of an Evangelist who is truly an author, not a mere editor. I remind you of our headline principle, in the study of the Bible: ***the Word of God, the meaning that God intended to reveal in inspired Scripture, is to be found by discerning the intentions of the Biblical writer.*** It is in this spirit that we must begin to read the mind of Mark. Because he was the first evangelist, we have less help than we have in reading Matthew or Luke; in the changes they made to Mark, we can build up a sense of their preconceptions and their theological aims. Mark has to speak in his own right, and we will have to have sharp ears in order to read him correctly, let alone sensitively.

The work we can most usefully draw on today is that of the school called *Redaktionsgeschichte* - the study of the Evangelist's editorship. As pointed out earlier, this is much easier for Mt and Lk, because we possess Mk - one of their primary sources - and we can (by painstaking comparisons between them) deduce a limited amount about the text of their second source, "Q". With Mk we have to do what is possible to separate out the *traditional* materials with which he worked from the *editorial and authorial work* which is his creative contribution..

- We can, in the first place, use the modern technical understanding drawn from use of vocabulary and from the style. Seasoned scholars familiar with the text can readily detect a chunk of traditional material *which has been left intact* from a pericope that has been subjected to authorial recasting.
- A second way is to take up themes which are of obvious importance to the evangelist - such as the Messianic Secret, or the special role of Galilee in the Gospel, or the use of the title "Son of Man". We can ask: *what are the causes espoused by this evangelist? What does he especially castigate or denounce?*
- A third way would be to note the techniques of the Gospel's building: the use of two related stories to sandwich a central and major unit: the use of triple units: the habit of

intercalation (the insertion of one story into another) like the narrative of Peter's denials into the trial story.

- A fourth way would be to identify clear elements of tradition (such as miracle stories) and observe the way in which Mark uses them.

Before Mark, it seems clear, there was no such thing as a literary Gospel. There was certainly a connected Passion account, there were cycles of miracle-stories, collections of sayings, collections of parables, an apocalyptic discourse, stories centred on particular locations (like Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, &c); but there was no consecutive assembly of these features, starting with John the Baptist and ending with the death and/or resurrection of Jesus. So Mark was indeed creating a new literary form. What were the influences that formed his thinking? While we thought of the Gospel as a simple life of Jesus or a chronicle of his ministry, these questions did not arise. But no biography ever began with a fully-grown appearance, like that of Mark's Jesus at the Jordan, and no chronicle paid so scant an attention to the dates, times, and order of the events chronicled. The intentions of the evangelist seem to be concerned far more with the conveyance of a correct *theology* of the figure of Jesus. The heart of this matter is addressed in the Passion story, but the whole range of the Gospel has it as a preoccupation. The study of the titles of Jesus (starting with Mk 1:1) will reveal the workings of this scheme.