

Chapter VIII

Source Criticism

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[p.139]

I. The Justification for Source Criticism

In the prologue to his gospel the author of Luke/Acts refers to many people before him who had "undertaken to compile an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us" (1:1). It is reasonable to infer from this that he knew some of these earlier writings, and it seems likely that he would have been influenced by them to a greater or lesser extent in the writing of his own gospel. There is nothing comparable to Luke's prologue in the other gospels, but it may be surmised that the other evangelists would have been in a similar position to the author of Luke/Acts, at least if their gospels are rightly dated after A.D. 50 or 60. It is not likely, despite the claims of some, that the highly literate Christian community of the first century will have studiously refrained from putting into writing traditions of the life and teaching of Jesus for the first thirty years of its existence, however much it expected the imminent end of the present age.

A case for source criticism might be made out on such *a priori* grounds, but the decisive evidence for the use of sources in the New Testament lies in the New Testament documents themselves. Not only are there dislocations¹ and apparent duplications² in the documents which suggest that the gospels, for example, have undergone a more complex editorial process than is often imagined; but much more important and much less ambiguous evidence is provided by the striking phenomenon of agreement between the synoptic gospels in certain passages.³ The agreement is too close to be explained as the accidental convergence of independent accounts, and the only adequate explanation is either in terms of a common source lying behind the different accounts or in terms of mutual dependence.⁴

Source criticism is needed to explain this sort of evidence, and it has not been displaced either by form criticism, which tries to explain how a story or saying was used in the oral tradition of the church before being incorporated into a source, or by redaction criticism, which seeks to analyse the New Testament writers' use of their sources. The form critic in fact needs the insights of source criticism, since he must trace the literary history of the traditions as far back as he can before speculating about the oral period; and so does the redaction critic, since he can comment reliably on an

[p.140]

author's editorial tendencies only if he knows what sources the author was using.

¹ E.g. one explanation of the awkwardness in Mk. 4:10-13 is that the evangelist was working with a source in which verses 11, 12 were not present.

² Compare Mt. 9:32-34 and 12:22-24.

³ Compare for example Mt. 21:23-27; Mk. 11:27-33; Lk. 20:1-8; or Mt. 8:8f. and Lk. 7:6f.

⁴ The agreements of 2 Peter and Jude demand the same explanation. For a similar phenomenon in the Old Testament compare the parallelism between the books of Kings and Chronicles.

II. The Methods of Source Criticism

1. WHERE THERE ARE TWO OR MORE OVERLAPPING TRADITIONS

The search for sources is an easier and much less speculative enterprise when the critic has several parallel traditions to analyse, such as the three synoptic gospels, than when he has only one. Given such a situation his procedure will be (a) to note the evidence internal to the documents themselves, i.e. the areas of overlap and the points of difference in the different traditions,⁵ (b) to note any relevant external evidence, e.g. the statements of the early church fathers about the writing of the gospels, and (c) to propose and test different possible explanations of the evidence for comprehensiveness and simplicity. Comprehensiveness is important, since simplicity is no virtue if any substantial part of the evidence is not accounted for; but simplicity is also a significant criterion, since almost any theory can be made comprehensive if sufficient modifications and exceptions are allowed.⁶

(a) *Explaining the internal evidence.* So far as internal evidence is concerned, the basic grist to the critic's mill is the combination of agreement and disagreement in the parallel documents; in the case of the gospels this includes agreement and disagreement in wording, order, contents, style, ideas and theology.

(i) *Wording.* The extensive verbal agreement of Matthew, Mark and Luke in various passages seems to most people to point to some sort of literary connexion, direct or indirect, between the synoptic gospels.⁷ When it comes to asking more precisely about their relationship to each other, it is observed that the three gospels have a very considerable amount of material where they all run parallel to each other, and that in this so-called Triple Tradition Matthew and Luke agree frequently with Mark's wording (and also with his order) either together or independently, but rarely with each other against Mark.⁸ It has usually been concluded from this that Mark stands mid-way between Matthew and Luke. Thus, for example, Matthew and Luke may be thought to have used Mark and not to have known each other; or Mark may be supposed to have conflated Matthew and Luke, always following them when they agree

⁵ The use of a synopsis, which sets out the relevant texts in parallel, is essential for this, and the underlining in different colours of the points of agreement and disagreement will help the student to appreciate the meaning of the so-called Synoptic Problem. (Cf. F. C. Grant *The Gospels Their Origin and their Growth* (London 1957), pp. 41ff.) The best known synopses of the gospels in Greek are *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, ed. K. Aland (Stuttgart 1964-), and *Synopsis of the First Three Gospels*, eds. A. Huck, H. Lietzmann, F. L. Cross (Oxford 1959).

⁶ The solution to the Synoptic Problem which has commanded most support for some 50 years or more is the Two Source Theory. According to this view, Mark's gospel was the first of our gospels to be written. Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their main sources, but they also made use of a sayings source which is no longer extant and which is known as "Q" (from the German word *Quelle* meaning "source"). Sometimes Q is thought of as oral material rather than as a written source. Although this has been the generally accepted solution of the problem for some time, there have always been dissentients. See W. R. Farmer's history of *The Synoptic Problem* (New York 1964).

⁷ For the view that the agreements can be adequately explained in terms of oral tradition see, for example, B. F. Westcott, *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels* (London, 1895⁸). It is certainly easy for us to underestimate the powers of memory that some had in the ancient world. Cf. B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Uppsala, 1961).

⁸ Dissentients from the Two Source Theory observe that the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark are not so rare or so minor as is often thought.

together and normally following one or the other when they disagree; or Mark may be thought to have used Matthew, and Luke may be thought to have used Mark.

These and other hypotheses make sense of the phenomenon in question, and to try to narrow down the number of options on the basis of the evidence of the wording is not easy, much of it being difficult to handle.

[p.141]

Thus it is particularly difficult to explain the different levels of agreement in the different parts of the tradition, for example in the Q material, i.e. in the passages where Matthew and Luke have parallel material which is not found in Mark. Some think that the fact that Matthew and Luke agree closely sometimes and very loosely at other times is explicable if they were using a single common source; others prefer to think in terms of a number of tracts of Q material. Deciding between such alternatives is not easy, since the evangelists were not simply copyists and scissors-and-paste editors, but individuals with minds of their own and also very probably with some knowledge of oral traditions of the life and teaching of Jesus.⁹ The critic therefore has to ask himself whether his knowledge of the evangelist's style and interests suggests that a particular difference can be explained as an editorial alteration by one evangelist or the other, and/or whether one or other of the evangelists may not have diverged from his written source under the influence of some oral tradition. Very often the answer will not be at all obvious.

(ii) *Order*. The conclusion that Mark stands mid-way between Matthew and Luke is suggested by the agreements and disagreements of Matthew, Mark and Luke in the ordering of their common material; but the significance of the phenomenon of order is in other respects less clear. For example, it has long been observed that the Q material is differently arranged in Matthew and Luke; in Matthew it is distributed through the gospel, in Luke it is found in two main blocks (6:20-7:35; 9:57-13:34). This seems to some to exclude the idea of Luke having known and used Matthew, making something like the document Q indispensable, since it is unreasonable to think of Luke extracting the Q sayings from their Matthean setting and then grouping them together artificially. Others on the other hand find the postulated Lukan editing quite intelligible: Luke was using Mark as his main source, and it was his deliberate policy not to confuse and conflate Mark and his other sources.

Weighing such opinions is difficult, and the disagreement of scholars over such points illustrates the precariousness of arguments about what seems credible and incredible. The danger is that in pronouncing something incredible a scholar will merely reveal his own lack of imagination and his own lack of sympathy with the situation in which the evangelist was writing.

(iii) *Contents—omissions, doublets, misunderstandings*. A comparison of the contents of the different gospels tends to confirm what was said about Mark being mid-way between Matthew and Luke in the Triple Tradition; but does it help us go further in excluding other hypotheses?

⁹ A citation of Papias in Eus. H.E. iii, 39, 4, shows that there was a living oral tradition in the early church even after the gospels were written.

Some would wish to argue for Marcan rather than Matthean priority on the grounds that Mark could not have known Matthew and have left out so much valuable material, e.g. the Sermon on the Mount. But this is very much the sort of argument that has already been criticised, being based on

[p.142]

assumptions about "what I would have done if I were the evangelist". In fact it is not really so difficult to suppose that Mark might have omitted large tracts of Matthew's teaching material, if, for example, his aim was primarily to write a gospel for the Gentile unbeliever. And even if this was not his aim, it remains true that omissions may well be explicable in terms of an editor's particular interests. The point can be reinforced in this case by two observations: (1) that the problem of omissions exists in one form or another on almost any theory of synoptic origins. Thus, if Luke used Mark, his "Great Omission" of Mark 6:45-8:26 must be explained. (2) That there is reason to believe that Mark omitted material that he might have included whether or not his was the first gospel.¹⁰ It is an attractively simple but quite unlikely assumption that the first evangelist included in his gospel all that he knew of Jesus' life and teaching.

Arguments about supposed omissions or insertions of material may have more force, if it can be shown that the insertion or omission corresponds with some sort of break or disjointedness in the sequence of the narrative.¹¹ Unfortunately, however, the evidence rarely points unambiguously in one direction, and it will often be arguable that the smoother fuller version of a story is a later writer's revision of the earlier dislocated text.

A rather similar argument is that based on supposed doublets in a gospel, which may be taken to suggest the use of two sources. In Matthew, for example, the accusations that Jesus cast out demons by the prince of demons comes twice (9:34; 12:24), and this is simply explained via the hypothesis that Matthew found the saying both in Q (cf. Lk. 11:15) and also in Mark (3:22). But arguments about doublets are not always quite as simple as they may look. It is not always easy, in the first place, to be sure that two similar stories or sayings are in fact the same: there can be no doubt that Jesus did and said the same or similar things on many different occasions, and there is no reason for assuming that the early church could have retained in the tradition only one saying or action of a particular type (e.g. one feeding of the multitudes). A second point to reckon with is the fact that an author may quite possibly repeat himself without this necessarily indicating the use of more than one source.¹²

¹⁰ See the possible hints of omissions in 4:1, 33; 12:1, 38. If it is admitted that Mark knew Q, then Mark's omissions were extensive.

¹¹ J. Chapman argues that Mark shows signs of disjointedness at certain points where he omits something that Matthew includes. See his *Matthew Mark and Luke* (London 1937). E. De Witt Burton lists the following criteria for identifying the second of two documents known to be directly related: (1) misunderstandings of one by the other; (2) insertions breaking the sequence of thought or symmetry of plan in the other; (3) clear omissions destroying the connection in the other; (4) insertions that can be explained according to a writer's aim and the omission of which by the other could not be explained; (5) the opposite of 4; (6) alterations conforming to the general method or tendency of the other. (*Some Principles of Literary Criticism and Their Application to the Synoptic Problem*, Chicago 1904).

¹² A simple, though not typical, example is the overlap at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts; it is quite intelligible that Luke might have gone back over ground covered in volume 1 at the beginning of volume 2.

Like suspected doublets, supposed misunderstandings are a possible but not very reliable means of detecting the use of sources. If it can be shown that something appearing in one document has been misunderstood or misplaced in a second document, then this evidently assists the critic who wishes to decide which of the two documents is secondary. The problem is to identify clear-cut examples.¹³

(iv) *Style*. Source critics have made a lot of the differences of style between the Synoptic Gospels. Thus Mark's has been judged the most primitive gospel, because his Greek is supposedly of a poor standard, containing numerous Aramaisms,¹⁴ and also because he includes the sort of vivid irrelevant details that an eyewitness might be expected to include in a life of Jesus whereas Matthew and Luke omit such things as superfluous.¹⁵

[p.143]

Unfortunately arguments such as these, at least in the way that they are usually presented, are not at all cogent. An author's style depends very much on the author, and, unless he is copying a source closely and suppressing his own style, an author whose Greek is poor or colloquial or Aramaizing will use that sort of Greek whether or not he is using a source. Mark, for example, was the sort of writer to use *mat* repeatedly, whether he was writing with or without a source.¹⁶ So far as Mark's vivid touches go, both common sense and a study of the development of the gospel tradition in the early church¹⁷ suggest that such things are as likely to have been added into the tradition as omitted from it.

A different and potentially much more convincing argument from style depends on the possibility of detecting differences in style within a particular work according to whether or not a source was being used at a particular point. It has been argued, for example, that Matthew's way of using the Old Testament changes when he begins to run parallel to Mark and that he uses the LXX to a much greater degree in his so-called Marcan quotations than elsewhere,¹⁸ and a different argument from style has recently been proposed on the basis of the statistical analysis of the gospels.¹⁹ These arguments as they have been put forward so far may not be convincing, but the method being tried is one that could prove fruitful.

To say that arguments from style are frequently unsuccessful is not to say that they can never be of any value. In particular instances it may be possible to urge that stylistic peculiarities in one account and not in a parallel account point to a particular relationship. It is, however,

¹³ G. M. Styler claims that Herod's grief at John the Baptist's death is out of place in Mt. 14:9, since Matthew has given the impression that Herod wished to kill John; Matthew has taken the expression from Mark's account in which it makes good sense. (Excursus on "The Priority of Mark" in C. F. D. Moule's *Birth of the New Testament* (London 1966 z), p. 229). Styler's observation is an interesting one, but the expression is not unintelligible if Matthew is read for itself apart from Mark.

¹⁴ On whether Mark's is the most Semitic gospel see E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge 1969) p. 254.

¹⁵ See, for example, Mark's description of the 5000 in 6:39, 40.

¹⁶ H. G. Jameson, *The Origin of the Synoptic Gospels* (Oxford 1922), pp. 91f. and B. C. Butler, *The Originality of St Matthew* (Cambridge 1951), pp. 116f., argue for Matthean priority on the basis of style, claiming that it is very hard to imagine Matthew producing his elegant, well-ordered and often poetic gospel on the basis of Mark.

¹⁷ Cf. Sanders, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁸ See R. H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden 1967), pp. 150f.

¹⁹ A. M. Honore, *Nov.T* 10 (1968), pp. 95-147.

important not to claim too much for the evidence and to remember, for example, that on occasion a later gospel may have the most primitive form of a tradition.

(v) *Ideas and theology.* Attempts have been frequently made to try and put the gospels into some sort of chronological order according to their particular ideas or theology. Thus Mark has been thought to have the most primitive account of Jesus' visit to Nazareth, since he speaks of Jesus being unable to do miracles (except that he healed a few sick people) (6:5); Matthew here simply and more reverently says that Jesus did not do many miracles (13:58); he does not ascribe any inability to the Lord. Mark later speaks of the disciples failing to understand Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection (9:32); Matthew speaks of their "grieving exceedingly" (17:23), implying that they understood at least something.

This is another argument that sounds attractive, but which is not in fact as simple as it sounds. 1. It is often hard to be sure that a supposed difference in outlook is a real one; in the case cited, for example, Mark could well have substituted his account of Jesus' visit to Nazareth for Matthew's without intending anything very significant by his alterations. 2. It is not usually easy to tie down a particular idea of theology or outlook to a particular period in early church history. One cannot, for example, say simply that Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish and therefore the most primitive; nor can one assume that a high Christology is always a late Christology.²⁰

[p.144]

3. It is a mistake to suppose that the evangelists will simply have mirrored the ideas of the church and of the time in which they lived. If Mark shows a particular interest in the disciples' failings and weaknesses, this does not prove that he was writing in a period before the apostles had come to be revered and respected, but more probably that he saw some particular value in describing the disciples' weaknesses; if he did, then it is quite likely that this would have come across—like his literary style—whether he was using sources or not.

(b) *The external evidence.* The limitations of the arguments based on the internal evidence make the potential importance of the external evidence greater. There has in recent years been a tendency to neglect the statements of the church fathers relating to the writing of the gospels, partly perhaps because critics concluded on internal grounds that Mark was the first gospel, thus contradicting the unanimous testimony of the fathers and casting doubt on their reliability as witnesses. But if, as many believe, the Synoptic Problem is a much more open question than previous generations of scholars have thought, then the external evidence, which is admittedly not very extensive and not always clear in its implications, must again be taken seriously.

2. WHERE THERE ARE NO OVERLAPPING TRADITIONS

Source criticism may be a difficult art when the critic has several parallel traditions to compare; it is even more difficult when he has only one tradition to work with. But this has

²⁰ It is usual to date most of the Pauline corpus with its high Christology before the first of the gospels.

It is surprisingly difficult to date any of the material in the gospels. A phrase like that in Mt. 27:8, "That field was called the field of blood up to today", suggests *prima facie* a date before the destruction of Jerusalem; but it is not impossible to avoid that implication.

not deterred scholars from making the attempt, and there are a number of supposedly tell-tale signs that the critic will look for which may indicate the use of sources.

(a) *Breaks and dislocations of the sequence*. First, there are from time to time awkward breaks and apparent dislocations in the narrative sequence which are explicable if it is supposed that the author was trying to weave into a single account material drawn from a number of different sources. Thus in John 14:31 Jesus says "Rise, let us go hence", as though the previous discourse were over and as though he were about to go out to Gethsemane and to his death; but then the discourse resumes and three full chapters elapse before Jesus finally goes out. One possible explanation of this is that the evangelist was working with a number of tracts of material which he has not wholly integrated.

The success of the critic's search for sources via dislocations depends on the original author's lack of success in integrating his sources, and will therefore be of little use if the original writer was competent as an editor. It also depends on the critic's ability to interpret dislocations in the text accurately. Critics, whether source, form or redaction critics, are sometimes unimaginative in their treatment of documents, making much of apparent dislocations or incoherences and not allowing that the New Testament

[p.145]

writers might periodically have expressed themselves loosely and with something less than absolute precision. If an argument for sources is to be cogent, it must be clear that the phenomenon in question is really significant and that the source critical explanation is superior to others that are possible.

(b) *Stylistic inconsistency*. Stylistic inconsistency within a document is a second sign pointing to the possible use of sources. For example, Luke's birth narratives are very Hebraic; and, although a possible explanation may be that Luke was a versatile author who chose his style to suit his material, it is probably simpler to postulate the use of sources at this point, whether oral or written.²¹

(c) *Theological inconsistency*. If it can be shown that a particular passage or verse contains theological ideas that are quite untypical of, or better, still contradictory to, the theology of the writer as it is expressed elsewhere, then it may reasonably be argued either that the material is an interpolation or that it is material taken by the author from a source and not properly assimilated. Scholars have claimed to have detected this sort of inconsistency in Mark, for example in Mark 4, where they have identified what they regard as two inconsistent views of the purpose of parables side by side in the same chapter.²² The difficulty with this sort of argument lies in identifying genuine and significant inconsistencies. Presumably the authors of the documents themselves were not conscious of letting serious inconsistencies through, and the question in each case is, therefore, whether the original author was correct in assuming no inconsistency or whether the modern critic is correct in detecting certain contradictions.

²¹ So E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London 1966), p. 28. Something similar may be said about the Aramaic flavour of parts of the early chapters of Acts.

²² Compare v.33, supposedly the primitive view, with vs. 11, 12 and 34, supposedly Mark's view.

(d) *Historical inconsistencies*. Historical inconsistencies in a document, for example, doublets, are a fourth possible clue that may indicate that the author is using sources.²³ But for the difficulty of this sort of argument see our earlier discussion of doublets.

III. Learning from Source Criticism

I. THE HISTORY OF THE BIBLICAL TRADITIONS

The Christian's knowledge of the historical events that are fundamental to his faith derives from the New Testament, and so the study of the history of the New Testament documents is ultimately of the greatest relevance to him. It may strengthen his convictions about those events, as also his belief in the inspiration of Scripture; or it may do the opposite. The Christian will be encouraged by source criticism if it leads him to conclude that the evangelists used primitive written sources in writing the gospels; the importance of sources will be especially great if the author of the gospel (or of Acts) is not thought to have been an eyewitness of the events he records. If on the other

[p.146]

hand source criticism were to indicate that the evangelists' only sources were vague and unreliable folk traditions transmitted over a long period of time, this would be disturbing to the believer.

The mistake should not be made, however, of thinking that an author cannot be trusted where no source can be detected. The limitations of the source critic's methods have been made clear, and it cannot be assumed that it will always be possible to identify the use of written sources, still less of oral sources, especially if the author was a competent editor. Whether or not any of the evangelists are thought to have been eyewitnesses of the events they describe, it is virtually certain that they will all have been familiar with many of the traditions they record long before they wrote them down, and the fact that such traditions may be recorded in the language and style of the evangelist in question is scarcely surprising and proves nothing about the reliability of the tradition.

2. THE METHODS AND OUTLOOK OF THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS

When it can be firmly established what sources were used by any particular writer, the modern reader can learn a lot from the writer's use of his sources, for example about the writer's method of writing. The fact that Matthew and Luke agree so extensively with Mark and especially closely in the words of Jesus indicates, if it is accepted that Mark was their source, that they were concerned to preserve the received tradition and that they did not feel free to write the story of Jesus just as they pleased in accordance with their own theology.

²³ A. Harnack argued that two sources lie behind Acts 2-5, in which the apostles are twice arrested and put in custody and twice brought before the Jewish authorities. For discussion of his view see J. Dupont, *The Sources of Acts* (E.T. London 1964), pp. 35f.

The other side to this coin is the divergence of the gospels at numerous points, which suggests to some that the evangelists were not worried about precision in historical details. Thus Luke has Jesus heal blind Bartimaeus on the way into Jericho whereas his source Mark has the miracle on the way out of the city, and it may well be concluded from this that Luke's concern was not with the precise location of such events. If this is the correct conclusion, then clearly it is a complication for the Christian wishing to use and defend the gospels as documents that are historically trustworthy. To assert that one or more of the evangelists was reliable on the major historical and theological questions but that he felt free over historical details may be necessary and may be compatible with a high view of Scriptural authority, but it is less straightforward than maintaining that the evangelists were faithful in large and small points alike.²⁴

Whether the divergences between the gospels do in fact demand that we take the more complicated view is uncertain. It was observed earlier that the evangelists will have been familiar with many of the traditions which they record in their gospels long before they found them in the document that was their main written source, which means that a writer's departures from his main source are not necessarily his own improvisations, and that the possibility of harmonizing the divergent accounts should not be too quickly ruled out.²⁵ Once this is realised and allowance is made (a) for the fact that

[p.147]

different witnesses and narrators of an event will always view the event from different perspectives, (b) for stylistic variation, (c) for the interpretative work of the individual evangelist bringing out the meaning of the original event or saying for a particular church situation, the number of divergences that appear to demand the hypothesis that the evangelists were unconcerned for accuracy in detail will not be very great.²⁶

A source critical analysis allows the critic to say something about a writer's method of writing, and also about his particular interests and ideas. Although the redaction critic may be able to detect certain dominant motifs in a writing even when he is uncertain about the sources used by its author, his task is made immeasurably easier when he can compare the writing with the source lying behind it. Thus, for example, when Matthew is compared with Mark, Matthew is seen to have a particular emphasis on the Jewish people; but in order to say whether this was a definite Matthean interest or *Tendenz* or not, we need to know what his sources were. If Mark was his source, the answer would presumably be yes; but if some very strongly Jewish traditions of the Jerusalem church were his main source, the answer might conceivably be the opposite.²⁷

Since it will from time to time throw light on what the author or authors intend in a particular passage, source criticism is important for biblical exegesis in general and not just for

²⁴ Luke's detailed accuracy in parts of Acts is well attested, and his prologue does not suggest that he was interested only in the broad sweep of events and not in the details.

²⁵ It also means that an evangelist will often have had a way of checking his main source and of confirming it.

²⁶ On Luke's location of the healing of Bartimaeus see J. N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (London 1950), pp. 467f.

²⁷ The critic's analysis of 2 Peter and Jude will be affected in some respects at least if he believes that Jude was the source of 2 Peter rather than that 2 Peter was the source of Jude or that a common source lies behind both of them.

redaction criticism in particular. Difficulties of interpretation, for example, may be cleared up when a document is compared with its source and when it is seen how a tradition is used by different writers;²⁸ and a source critical analysis is of obvious value to the exegete wishing to make sense of apparently divergent versions of the same tradition and wishing to avoid an arbitrary choice between the versions or an uninformed harmonization. But as well as bringing benefits, source criticism may raise problems for the expositor, if it suggests that a biblical writer has departed significantly from his source. For example, the expositor may find himself having to choose between preaching on a source critic's reconstruction of a word of Jesus and the supposed misunderstanding or creative reinterpretation of that saying found in the gospels. He may perhaps learn something about how the biblical tradition may be applied to different audiences, but there are difficult questions that arise in this situation regarding the authority of the different versions of the saying. The problem arises, however, only if the source critic finds himself forced to conclude that the later writer has departed significantly from the original meaning.

3. THE EARLIEST PERIOD OF CHURCH HISTORY

Our knowledge about what happened to the traditions of the life and teaching of Jesus before the gospels were written is sadly lacking; but if it can be demonstrated that collections of sayings such as Q or the postulated parable collection lying behind Mark 4 were in existence from an early date, this is evidence of the first importance for the historian. Through an examination of the form and contents of such documents he may also be able

[p.148]

to discover something of the interests and ideas and theology of the authors and so of the churches where the documents were compiled and first circulated.²⁹ This is, however, no easy task when one is dealing with complete and extant documents; it is still harder when the sources have first to be reconstructed.

[p.150]

APPENDIX

SOURCE CRITICISM ILLUSTRATED

For an example of the source critic's task and the potential value of his work the student may examine Mt. 12:1-8 and its parallels (Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 6:1-5) with the aid of a synopsis of the gospels in Greek.

1. *The source critic's task*

²⁸ Mark's προφήτευσον in 14:65 is explained in Matthew and Luke, though whether rightly or wrongly may be debated.

²⁹ The same point would apply to other New Testament books apart from the gospels. If, for example, Bultmann's theory that a gnostic source lies behind 1 John and that this has been edited by an ecclesiastical redactor were to be accepted, this would evidently be of interest to the historian of early Christian doctrine.

This passage is part of the so-called triple tradition, and Matthew, Mark and Luke overlap extensively, notably in Mt. 12:3, 4 and parallels. Compare Mt.'s οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε τί ἐποίησεν Δαυίδ, ὅτε ἐπείνασεν καὶ ἰ μετ' αὐτοῦς τῶς εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοὺς ἄρτους τῆς προθέσεως ἔφαγον with Mark and Luke. As well as agreements between all three gospels, there are agreements of Matthew and Mark against Luke (e.g. in various minor points of grammatical construction in Mt. 12:1-2 and parallels; also of Mark and Luke against Matthew (e.g. ἐγένετο Mk. 2:23 and parallels, ἔδωκεν v.26, καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς v.27); most modern critics would want to treat Mark here as elsewhere as the source of Matthew and Luke. But there are complications, notably in the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark, e.g. positively in the use of the words ἐσθίειν (Mt. 12:1 and parallels) and μόνος (Mt. 12:4 and parallels), and in the order of words in the expression Κύριος γὰρ ἐστὶν τοῦ σαββάτου ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (Mt. 12:8 and parallels), and negatively in the omission of several Marcan phrases, including most strikingly the whole of Mark's verse 27. These agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark raise difficult questions for the source critic. Is their agreement perhaps coincidental? Certainly Matthew and Luke might both independently have omitted Mark's ἐπὶ Ἀβισθαὶρ ἀρχιερέως since Mark's dating of the incident in question is problematic and apparently mistaken; but can all the other agreements be equally simply explained? If not, then one alternative view is that Matthew and Luke had a common non-Markan source at this point; Mark's verse 27 (which is introduced by his characteristically vague imperfect phrase καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς) could then be regarded as a Marcan interpolation into the context. Whether this view or another is correct is not important for our argument at present; the example is cited simply to illustrate the sort of data which the source critic seeks to interpret.

[p.151]

2. The value of source criticism

If some sort of answer can be given to the source critical questions, of what value is that answer? First, it will help us to understand something of the history of the gospel traditions and of the evangelists' method of writing. If, for example, it is concluded that Mark's verse 27 is a saying imported into the context by Mark, then this is a piece of evidence which supports the view that Mark's gospel is in part at least arranged topically not chronologically; it may also be seen as evidence confirming the view that gospel traditions (or some of them) circulated in the early church without any particular historical context.

Second, it should help us to understand something of the evangelists' redactional concerns. If it is concluded that Mark was Matthew's primary source here, then his omission of Mark's radical saying about the sabbath being made for man is striking, as is his addition of the saying about the priests working on the sabbath and his quotation (for the second time in his gospel, cf. 9:13) of Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy not sacrifice." (His change in the order of Mark's verse 28 may also be regarded as significant.) Matthew may be thought among other things to be reacting against the possible antinomian tendency of Mark's verse 27 and to be showing that Jesus' concern was not for the abolition of the law, but for its proper interpretation. Conversely if Mark's verse 27 is his own addition to the tradition (whether the saying goes back to Jesus or not), then this may tell us something significant about Mark's liberal view of the law (cf. also Mk. 7:19).

Thirdly, answering the source critical questions may help us decide about some of the difficult points of interpretation in the different gospels. For example, some scholars have wanted to

take Mark's verses 27 and 28 very closely together, interpreting the one by the other. Thus it has been suggested on the one hand that the ἄνθρωπος referred to in verse 27 is really the υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου of v.28, i.e. it is Jesus himself who is the man for whom the sabbath was made; it has been suggested on the other hand that the υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου of v.28 is really the ἄνθρωπος of v.27 and that the Son of man who is lord of the sabbath is not Jesus in particular, but man in general. Whether either of these views is to be recommended is doubtful on any source critical hypothesis; but if the source critic were able to establish that Mark's verse 27 is the evangelist's interpolation and that Mark's source had his verse 28 following on from his verse 26, then this would be an additional, though still not decisive, argument to be weighed on the side of those who want to take verses 27 and 28 separately. Similarly in Matthew: his train of thought in verses 5-8 is not immediately straightforward, and verse 8, for example, does not at first sight appear to follow very well from verse 7. Now if the source critics who say that Matthew used Mark as a source are correct, this disjointedness is simply explained. Matthew has added his own material in verses 5-7, and verse 8 is as a result left hanging. It is not necessary on this hypothesis—and indeed it may be a mistake—to try by ingenuity to interpret Matthew's verses 5-8 as a coherent unity. If on the

[p.152]

other hand Matthew is regarded as the oldest form of the tradition, then it will at least be reasonable to see if sense can be made of the sequence as it stands. Answering source critical questions may help the exegete in this sort of way to interpret the gospel texts accurately.

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