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PROBLEMS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Far too much has already been written on the Synoptic Problem. General studies and detailed work on small portions of the question have accumulated year after year. At this stage the only justification for another monograph is either a contribution of overlooked or unrealized facts, or an examination of axioms which, through long and uncritical acceptance, have stood in the way of progress and have generated unnecessary paradoxes. A recent provocative and illuminating book¹ has shown us how it was necessary in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth for many theologians and scripture scholars to believe that Mark was the first of the Synoptic Gospels. For Mark, they thought, contained less legendary material and less miraculous happenings; and if they were to remain Christians in a rational age, this was a Gospel in which they could more readily place their attenuated faith. Such details as the Infancy Narratives and the Resurrection Appearances must represent a mythologizing, theologizing or paganizing of the original primitive tradition.

The classical form of the orthodox doctrine that Mark is the earliest of the Synoptics and that Matthew and Luke have combined Mark with a second document, given the shorthand title Q (German *Quelle*), was provided by B. H. Streeter in his magisterial book *The Four Gospels*.² The ground, of course, had been diligently tilled before Streeter, and in the course of the tilling many valuable finds came to light, but the really impressive result of Streeter's work was that, with few exceptions, largely of the Roman persuasion, scholars were prepared to accept the so-called Two-Document theory - many indeed have continued to do so - even though the arguments on which the hypothesis was *originally* based have been found inadequate.³ We are confronted here with a not unfamiliar syndrome in scholarship: my result must be right; if my reasons for subscribing to it are demonstrably false, I must hunt up some more. As an example of this approach we may cite the comment of G. M. Styler: 'It seems that, however insecure the arguments used in the past, the reasons for accepting the priority of Mark

are in fact strong.⁴ And we are now frequently told that great advances have been made in our understanding of the Synoptics by the method of *Redaktionsgeschichte*, which often seems to involve considering how Mark and Luke have reworked the *theology* of Mark; enquiries of this kind necessarily imply the use of Markan priority as a working hypothesis.⁵ So prestigious has this approach become that even a number of Roman Catholic scholars, perhaps motivated in part by a misguided ecumenism, have found that their interest in *Redaktionsgeschichte* has led them towards an untraditional acceptance of the Two-Document theory.⁶

An uncritical acceptance of the axioms and presuppositions of the Markan priorists is not the only, or indeed the most basic, methodological problem with which we are faced. For such has been the authority of Streeter and the tradition of which his work was the culmination, that even the dissidents have been almost universally tempted to see the problem in the terms that have been authorized. Those scholars who have wanted to argue the Augustinian position that Matthew (or an Aramaic Matthew) is the earliest Gospel,⁷ and that Mark depends on Matthew, have accepted the orthodox view that the problem is one of direct literary dependence. Thus Butler argued that Peter, the primary source of Mark, used a Greek Matthew (a 'complete and authentic translation' of the original Aramaic Matthew) as his aide-memoire,⁸ while Vaganay wanted us to believe that Mark (Peter?) had two sources, a Greek Matthew (derived from an Aramaic Matthew) and a Sayings Source (Sg), also in Greek.⁹ Farmer too, though bold enough to revert to the untenable thesis of Griesbach that Mark is some sort of summary based on Matthew and Luke, still operates within the bounds of literary source criticism;¹⁰ as most recently does one of his disciples, Dungan, who, while deploring the logic of Streeter in deducing, from the facts that Matthew reproduced 90% of the subject matter of Mark in largely identical language and that Luke reproduces a bit more than half of Mark, the conclusion that Mark is therefore *prior* to Matthew and Luke, still concludes no more than that 'all Streeter's statement proves is that Mark is in some sort of literary relation with Matthew and Luke'.¹¹

There are, of course, a number of facts about Matthew, Mark and Luke which might seem to justify such proceedings. They must therefore be summarized at the outset.¹² About eleven twelfths of Mark's subject-matter appears in Matthew and over half of it appears in Luke. In passages where the same incidents are narrated in all three Gospels, that is, in the so-called Triple Tradition, many of Mark's actual Greek words appear in Matthew, or Luke, or both; 51% of Mark's words appear in Matthew. Furthermore, Matthew and Luke generally agree with Mark's order in presenting their pericopae, and where one of them diverges in this ordering (and Luke

diverges very rarely), the other normally follows Mark's order. In fact not only do Matthew and Luke rarely agree against Mark in wording and in the syntax of their sentences, they almost never agree against Mark in the matter of arrangement.¹³ Again, it was said, after the account of the Temptation, Matthew and Luke never agree in inserting a particular piece of Q material into the same context in Mark. Finally, so it was claimed, it must be the case that when we are dealing with literary relationships, the most primitive writing is necessarily the oldest. Markan priorists then claimed to show that Mark is clearly more primitive, while supporters of Matthew countered by bringing up the argument that since many Matthaean passages are the more primitive, Matthew must therefore be the source of the less primitive version of the same events in Mark, and, in some cases perhaps, in Luke.¹⁴

As our problem was traditionally posed, either Mark, with Matthew and various other material at his disposal, sits down to write a new Gospel, or Matthew, already in possession of Mark and Q, begins his work of assimilation.¹⁵ Let us look at this more closely. In a community where a copy of Matthew is already available, why should someone write another Gospel like our Mark? It is shorter than Matthew, omits a great deal of Matthew, most obviously the Infancy Narrative, the Sermon on the Mount and the Resurrection Appearances. What purpose would it serve? Perhaps purposes can be excogitated. Farmer, as we noted, thought of a 'mixed' community in Alexandria or Rome for whom a summary of Matthew and Luke would be an indication of a single common tradition. But if so, how do we explain omitting the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes and the Nativity?¹⁶ In fact, the most obvious motive for a new production would be that the author (for 'heretical' reasons) wished to *suppress* some of the Matthaean material. According to Irenaeus and Epiphanius, we have recently been reminded, Marcion did in fact produce a 'version' of Luke stripped of the Infancy Narratives and much of Jesus' teaching, while Irenaeus tells us that some of the Docetists preferred Mark because it seemed to support their own theological idiosyncracies better.¹⁷ So the theoretical possibility exists that Mark could have been produced as a deliberate re-writing of Matthew or Luke. But in fact there is no evidence and no tradition at all that this was what happened. There is no significant association of Mark's Gospel with those wishing to suppress elements of Matthew or Luke. Mark's Gospel is not only assumed to be thoroughly orthodox; it was also, in fact, comparatively neglected in antiquity. So if its author intended it to replace Matthew and Luke, the least that can be said is that he totally misjudged his audience. So far as we can tell, it was Matthew's Gospel which enjoyed the greatest vogue among the Synoptics, and the problem still remains with us that, heresy aside, it is hard to explain the composition of

Mark in any Christian community if Matthew, or indeed any other substantive and authoritative literary document, was already available in that community. Of course, if the community which generated Mark did not possess Matthew, then there is an obvious need of a written text whether Matthew was in fact in existence or not. Butler, it may be noted, was perhaps aware of difficulties about the appearance of Mark in a 'Matthaeian' community when he claimed that Mark was 'Peter's counter-signature to the witness of his fellow-apostle in Matthew', and if, as Butler supposes, there are reasons why the claim that Mark depends on Matthew cannot be denied, perhaps we should accept this as the best explanation of facts available in the circumstances. But there are reasons to think that Butler's case is not as strong as he believes.

If we look at the matter the other way round, and ask: Why in a community that possesses Mark should there arise the need for a Gospel like that of Matthew? the answer is less difficult to find. Indeed most scholars, including Butler, though not, of course, Farmer, hold that there is no doubt that Luke was produced in just such circumstances, i.e. that the Lucan community possessed Mark; and I myself would agree that there are no particularly compelling reasons for denying that the author of Luke knew Mark. In any case, whatever be the truth about the origins of Luke, it would clearly be quite reasonable for the author of Matthew (whom I shall henceforward, simply for convenience, refer to as Matthew)¹⁸ to do what Streeterian orthodoxy says that he did, namely combine the brief text of Mark with whatever other material he had,¹⁹ and thus produce a more complete account of Jesus from birth (or before) to Resurrection. So from the point of view of the needs of a particular community it looks as though the Markan priorist is on firmer ground - unless it can be shown that it is unlikely that Matthew did, in fact, have a text of Mark in front of him when he wrote, or that he was necessarily influenced by such a text directly or indirectly.

In the end, there will be no substitute for commenting on the theoretical arguments for Markan priority and looking at the texts of Matthew and Mark again to see how far internal evidence points towards either one of them depending on the other; but before making a start on that potentially endless examination, I should at least comment on one or two further axioms and dogmas of Synoptic scholarship.

(1) First of all the matter of date. If we accept, as I do, that Luke and Acts are, as they show on their face, written by the same author, we presumably have to place Mark before the earliest reasonable date for Luke-Acts. Assuming that Luke precedes Acts, and noting that Acts ends with the imprisonment, but not the death of Paul in Rome, should we not

assume that Luke must have been written not much later than A.D. 64?

There seem to be only two specific objections to such a date: (i) that when Luke speaks of Jerusalem being 'surrounded by armies' (21:20), he knew that such a thing had occurred under Vespasian and Titus; (ii) that in Luke's version of the Beatitudes (6:22) we read 'they exclude you (*ἀφορίσωσιν*) and revile you and cast out (*ἐκβάλωσιν*) your name as evil', where Matthew has 'they revile you and persecute you and speak every evil against you' (5:11). The former language is sometimes said to indicate that Luke is referring to the Birkath-ha-Minim, the curse upon Christians in the synagogues that was formally instituted in the eighties, after Jamnia.²⁰ Such an interpretation, however, is the merest guess. Luke's language does not necessarily indicate the post-Jamnian situation; it could perfectly well describe what regularly happened to Paul and other missionaries. As for Vespasian and Titus we should notice that Luke does not state that Jerusalem has fallen, only that it is besieged. The passage might even be taken as evidence for Luke's writing *before* the fall of Jerusalem in 70 but after the beginning of the Jewish War in 66. But such an explanation is not essential. Luke, who tends to prefer the homely to the high-flown, might have simply preferred to rewrite the language of Danielic prophecy, the 'abomination of desolation', in terms more intelligible to Gentiles.

We may conclude that there is no good reason to date Luke much after the mid-sixties - unless we are certain that Luke also knew Matthew, and that Matthew has a substantially later date. But we cannot yet assume either that Luke knew Matthew, or, more importantly in our argument, that Matthew itself is later than A.D. 65.

Hence, at the present stage of our enquiry we have to maintain that Mark is probably to be dated in the early sixties,²¹ unless we assume that Luke wrote a first draft (Proto-Luke), came across Mark's text later on, and then reworked his draft to include the Markan material.²² There are, of course, enormous difficulties in that hypothesis, not the least of them being that Luke's rewriting must have involved recasting his whole original project in a Markan framework, for Luke seems in general to have fitted blocks of non-Markan material into a Markan frame.

Leaving aside, therefore, the hypothetical and unjustified rewriting of Luke by Luke, we have to find Mark to have been written some time before the mid-sixties, for he is available for use by Luke at about that time. Indeed a date somewhere between 60 and 65 for Mark is generally acceptable to modern scholarship, and more or less accords - for what that is worth - with the ancient testimony that Mark was written by Mark either after the deaths of Peter and Paul (Irenaeus),²³ or during Peter's lifetime (Clement of Alexandria).²⁴ Now if we turn to Matthew, we observe that

Markan priorists are bound to find a date later than that of Mark, but if we regard the question of the priority of these two Gospels as still open, very little remains in the way of argument for fixing Matthew to the period after A.D. 70. Indeed the only substantial argument that remains is another version of the claim about Jamnia: this time it is argued that *Matthew* reflects the split between Church and Synagogue that was then more or less formalized.²⁵ But again this claim is not as strong as it has sometimes appeared.²⁶ The Pauline letters give ample independent evidence of hostility to Christians in synagogues well before A.D. 70 - quite enough to account for the anti-Jewish sections of Matthew, even if we take no account of possible additions and variations to the original Matthaean text. And if we wish to discuss the basic relationships between Christianity and other forms of Judaism in Palestine before the fall of Jerusalem, we can hardly forget the evidence of the *events* of the Gospels²⁷ - not to mention the death of Stephen and the subsequent persecution described in Acts (8:1), the killing of James, brother of John, by Herod (Acts 12:2), and the actions of the Sadducaean high-priest Ananias in A.D. 62 in securing the death of James the 'brother of the Lord'.²⁸

In fact what seems to be the convincing argument for a date for Matthew after A.D. 70 is merely the assertion that Matthew depends on Mark. Remove that assertion and the date for Matthew becomes uncertain. It is incredible, for example, that scholars should claim that it was impossible for Jesus to predict the destruction of the Temple (Mt 24:1 - 3, Mk 13:1 - 4, Lk 21:5 - 7), or that the reference to the 'abomination of desolation' (Mt 24:15, Mk 13:14; cf. Lk. 21:20) must be a *post eventum* prophecy, that is, a 'prophecy' attributed to Jesus after the event had occurred, but not actually uttered by him. Accusations about the destruction of the Temple were among the charges levelled against Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Mt 26:61, Mk 14:58). Perhaps these too can be dismissed as later invention, but the ice is getting thinner! And is it altogether absurd to suggest that an intelligent Jew, soaked in the traditions of the Old Testament, could have uttered such forecasts of doom? Others besides Jesus had done so.²⁹

Neither references to persecution of Christians in synagogues, nor references to the predicted destruction of the Temple give us much to go on in determining a date for Matthew. Nor again does talk of Matthew's supposed ecclesiastical interests. Form critics are sometimes inclined to assume that references to a 'Church' (Mt 16:18 and 18:17), or indeed to any organization of the believers, must be anachronistic. Yet this is a very curious view to take. It assumes that Jesus could not have imagined (or presumably desired) that his followers should remain together after his

death - a wholly question-begging proposition. And let us look briefly at Mt 18:15ff. in a little more detail. Jesus says that if a brother sins, you must try to reprove him patiently, but 'if he refuses to listen . . . tell it to the Church'. And if that is of no avail, 'let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax-collector'. Probably a very appropriate saying for Jesus at this stage of his ministry: the 'Church' is for Jews only - a matter to which we shall return in a later discussion of the Syrophenician woman.

Of course, the question of later strands of material arises here. This section about the Church *could* be an interpolation into earlier material, given a bogus attribution to Jesus. Such arguments can always be used to rid ourselves of inconvenient material, but we cannot get very far along these lines. For even if the word 'Church' or its Aramaic equivalent is alien to Jesus, even if the *concept* of an organization of believers is similarly alien, we have absolutely no idea of when it first came into existence. In any case Matthew's Gospel was written several years after Jesus' death, presumably when even the term 'Church' could well have been current, but we have no means of reaching any kind of chronological precision.

In brief there is as yet no convincing evidence that Irenaeus was wrong when, perhaps paraphrasing or rewriting Papias, he declared that Matthew's Gospel was written while Peter and Paul were gossipping in Rome and laying the foundations of the Church.³⁰ Of course if Irenaeus were entirely accurate, he would have to be accepted in a further particular; that Matthew wrote earlier than Mark. But we should notice that Irenaeus does not say that Mark knew Matthew's work. We must leave these problems of chronology aside for the present.

(2) The second preliminary matter which demands discussion, however brief, is the alleged document Q. We recall that the classical theory in Synoptic criticism is that Matthew and Luke used Mark and supplemented it both with material unique to each of themselves and with a second common document. This document, originally thought to be a collection of the sayings of Jesus, was supposed to account for the material common to Matthew and Luke, but absent from Mark. A number of scholars, including Streeter,³¹ believed that it was represented in a more pure form by Luke than by Matthew, since it can be observed that whereas Matthew seems to be in the habit of blending Markan with non-Markan material,³² Luke prefers to operate with blocks. Hence the Q-blocks in Luke are more or less pure Q. Other Two-Documentarians, however, doubt this result: Burney, for example, comments that 'If we admit that parallelism is a sign of originality, we must assign to Matthew the palm for having (at least in such cases as can be tested by this criterion) preserved the sayings of "Q" in a more original form than Luke'.³³

But arguments about whether Matthew or Luke preserves a better text of Q are secondary to the question of whether Q ever existed, and if it did exist, what it contained. Those who disliked the Q-theory used to be able to claim that there is no evidence that written collections of sayings ever actually existed, and that their supporters often fell back on misinterpreting Papias' talk about *logia*.³⁴ Furthermore, they objected, if there were such collections, why did they disappear so rapidly and without trace? The question of the disappearance may still raise problems, but we do now know that at some stage, and probably at least as early as the first half of the second century, there were people who produced such sayings-collections: the Gospel of Thomas, which probably dates from not long after A.D. 140, is an example.³⁵ But the discovery of this document at Nag-Hammadi is not of immediate help in our present problems. In general it seems likely that Thomas depends on the canonical Gospels,³⁶ particularly Matthew and Luke, rather than that it is their source. However, there are certain *logia* which may derive from an original and independent tradition (e.g. 31, 32, 33). Perhaps more important, however, is the matter of Thomas' use of parables. All the parables that are collected by Matthew in his thirteenth chapter occur in the Gospel of Thomas, but they are scattered throughout the Gospel and the interpretations provided by Matthew are not given. Now we know that Matthew collects material on similar themes and groups it together. A comparison of Thomas' parables with those in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, therefore, might suggest that Thomas was using a source also available to Matthew. If this were so, there would be evidence, perhaps from the first century A.D., of the existence of a sayings-collection which might be a candidate for the label Q. But we must repeat that it is not certain that Thomas did use Matthew's source rather than Matthew. Other reasons for the scattering of parables throughout a Gospel might be adduced.

So we are still not in a position to determine whether there were or were not written collections of sayings circulating when Matthew and Luke were being written. More basic, however, is the problem that there are many good reasons for thinking that Q, whatever it was, must have been something more than a sayings-source. Recently Butler,³⁷ Farrei³⁸ and others have in fact suggested that Q seems to expand so much as to become indistinguishable from Matthew. Thus the sources of Luke would include not Mark and Q, but Mark and Matthew. This is a solution to which we can return later; let it suffice for the moment to say that there are considerable difficulties involved in supposing that Luke has knowledge of Matthew.³⁹ What I rather want to emphasize is that if Q seems able to expand from a sayings-source to - in the opinion of some - the virtual equivalent of Matthew,

there should also be grave doubts as to the likelihood of Q being a single document. In 1911 Streeter believed that not only Matthew and Luke, but also Mark, were dependent on Q,⁴⁰ and he cited a number of texts, of which the Beelzeboul controversy (Mk 3:23-30 and parallels) is among the most persuasive, as proof of it. In 1924, however, he argued that Matthew had assimilated Mark to Q in these passages, and that Mark and Q are each independent of the other.⁴¹ Streeter's manoeuvres seem designed merely as different ways of avoiding an unpleasant alternative, for there is non-Markan material common to Matthew and Luke (and agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark) which he thought could be explained by some sort of derivation from a common source or by Luke following Matthew; but for Streeter the second alternative was impossible. If we opt for the common source, however, we are in considerable difficulties about what other material that source contained apart from what is in our Matthew and Luke. Q may, or may not, have contained large parts of Mark which also appear in the Triple Tradition (Matthew and Luke as well as Mark), or even other material of which no record has come down to us. And, as we implied above, Q may be more than one document. That is sometimes admitted. But if it is, how do we determine the nature of all or any of these documents? The answers are many and varied.⁴²

Let us concentrate on one respect in which the question of Q (whatever he or she may be) is relevant to the problem of the relationship between Mark and Matthew. If there was no Q, how do we explain those passages where Matthew seems to preserve the more original tradition - and few would now deny that there are a number of such passages? If there was no Q, that is no document separate from Mark and Matthew, then it looks as though these passages point towards the dependence of Mark on Matthew as the more original text, with all the difficulties that entails. Unless, of course, we suppose that Matthew had access in Markan passages to non-documentary material - which, of course, he must have had. Styler commented,⁴³ 'If Matthew had access to a non-Markan source, then there is no problem for advocates of Marcan priority. Q is therefore relevant, since it is just what is required - i.e. a non-Markan source.' That is certainly true, but it gets us nowhere on the question of what Q was, and above all it assumes, which Styler and many others regularly assume, that Q (the non-Markan source for Matthew where Matthew parallels Luke) is a written document (or documents?) with, so to speak, a beginning, middle and end, or at least a specific purpose. But if in fact Q were unwritten material, then the 'primitivity' of particular *Markan* passages in Matthew's version proves nothing about the relationship between the two Gospels, or the dependence

of one on the other, for once we admit that Matthew is regularly using un-written, i.e. traditionally handed down material, there is nothing to stop us supposing that both Matthew and Mark preserve sections and versions of that same deposit. For if material shared by Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark, derives from oral tradition, it is hard to argue that Matthew would hold that material in such low esteem that he would *always* reject it in favour of Mark in Markan passages. Of course most students of the Synoptic Problem would cry halt at this point. It is, they say, an axiom of Synoptic criticism that although oral tradition might explain the divergences in the Synoptics, only literary derivation can explain the similarities. We must refrain from comment on this at this stage.

Of course, to say that Matthew and Mark preserve the same deposit is not to say that they derive from an original Ur-Markus, which Mark preserves more faithfully than Matthew. Nor is it necessarily to admit a Proto-Matthew available as a written source both for canonical Matthew and for Mark. It is merely to say that of the available traditions about Jesus, Matthew has selected some identical with those selected by Mark, some more distantly related and others additional. Reasons will be required to account for the similarities, particularly the similarities of order, but also those of material, among the traditions selected. But as to the total amount of source material available, it may be as well to quote the last words of John (21:25): 'But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that could be written.'

At this point it is necessary to revert briefly to the question of whether Luke knew Matthew. It is sometimes said that the alternatives are either that Luke knew Matthew or that he knew Q, for where else would he get the material which is neither peculiar to himself nor clearly borrowed from Mark, but which is shared with Matthew? Now, as we have already hinted, it need not follow that if Luke did not know Matthew, he must know a single written document in 'Q-passages'. Luke himself tells us (1:1) that there existed many written sources for the events connected with Jesus, and he adds that the originators of these various accounts were those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and 'ministers of the word'.⁴⁴ In other words accounts were handed down to Luke's generation, including Luke himself, and some of those who heard them wrote them down. The only reasonable exegesis of this is that there were both written and un-written accounts of Jesus' activities available to Luke. In view of this explicit statement, there seems to be little basis for deciding *a priori* whether, in the passages which Luke shares with Matthew only, (i) Luke follows Matthew, or (ii) Luke draws on an oral source (or sources) also available to