

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

THE NEED FOR CRITERIA

The early Christian tradition about 'all that Jesus began to do and teach', like the Jewish tradition alongside which it grew, was a living and developing tradition. This has been accepted by scholars of all persuasions. Thus Bonnard, who wishes to emphasize the kerygmatic unity of the early tradition, observes that one would expect to see such a theological tradition passed down in a tightly controlled form. But actually we do not find it so. 'Theologically coherent at its base, the Christian tradition reveals, until about the year 95, a prodigious liberty, a creativity both marvelous and disquieting for the historian.'¹ The German form critics, as is well known, especially emphasize the creative role of the early Christian communities in shaping and developing the tradition. But even Riesenfeld, who has helped lead a reaction against that view, and who argues for a fixed and controlled tradition both in Judaism and Christianity, grants that 'variations in the material took place in the process of tradition' in both spheres.² In a similar way Gerhardsson points out that not all of the Christian tradition was passed down with the same precision. Thus the sayings of Jesus show fewer changes than do the narrative material and the redactional framework, but even they are sometimes reworked.³ Whether one wishes to emphasize or minimize the degree of creativity on the part of the early communities, and thus the degree of change which took place in the tradition, problems are posed

¹ Pierre Bonnard, 'La Tradition dans le nouveau Testament', *R.H.Ph.R.* xl (1960), 21–2. Cf. also the statement by André Lacocque, 'La Tradition dans le Bas-Judaïsme', *R.H.Ph.R.* xl (1960), 6: 'ce sera l'œuvre unique de la Tradition d'empêcher la sclérose, de faire que l'Écriture ne soit pas statique, mais dynamique.'

² Harald Riesenfeld, *The Gospel tradition and its beginnings* (London, 1957), pp. 18, 22.

³ Birger Gerhardsson, *Tradition and transmission in early Christianity* (Lund, 1964), pp. 44–5. See also *Memory and manuscript* (Uppsala, 1961), pp. 334 f. and the comments by W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964), appendix xv, pp. 464 ff.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE PROBLEM

for the historian, as Bonnard has indicated. There are really two basic problems: how much material was created in the communities, and what development the material—whatever its origin—underwent during the course of its transmission. These two problems are closely related, and one's attitude toward the one will bear some relation to one's attitude toward the other. Nevertheless, they are separable. It is the purpose of this study to inquire into the latter problem: what was the tendency of the tradition; how much did it develop, and in what ways? A proper elucidation of this problem will elucidate the other also, and some light will be shed on the question of the role of the Christian communities in creating new material.

The concern of this study, then, is to analyze early tradition about Jesus in order to see what tendencies, if any, its development reveals. The chief result of such a study might be expected to be the development of criteria for judging the relative antiquity of parallel traditions. The question is, when two forms of one pericope exist, how one distinguishes the relatively earlier from the relatively later. Lacking apparent references to historical events (such as occur in Mt. 24. 15//Mk. 13. 14//Lk. 21. 20), how can the relative age of different forms of the same story be fixed?

The answer has always been that one may distinguish relatively early from relatively late forms of a certain story on the basis of knowledge of how the tradition as a whole developed. The later tradition will show certain characteristic changes when compared with the earlier tradition. It is our purpose to examine these characteristic changes in order to determine if they really be characteristic, and if so, how characteristic they are. We are thus concerned to examine the validity of 'internal criteria', that is, criteria for assessing relative age which are based on knowledge of the internal development of the early Christian tradition.

In order that the point and significance of this problem may properly be grasped, we may now briefly indicate four areas in which such criteria are not only useful but necessary. Indeed, these are four areas in which such criteria—whether rightly or wrongly—have already been used.

First of all, there is the existence of extra-canonical material which is more or less parallel with canonical material. Wherever

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE NEED FOR CRITERIA

such material exists, the possibility may be, and has been, raised whether the non-canonical material may not preserve a form of tradition older than that found in the canonical Gospels. This could conceivably be the case if the extra-canonical material appears to go back to a tradition independent of the canonical Gospels. The most recent and most striking instance of this possibility is the material in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas which is parallel to the canonical Synoptic material. The problem posed by the Gospel of Thomas will be discussed more fully below (pp. 40–3); here we need only point out that its existence requires criteria for determining the relative age of the material it has in common with our Synoptics. Thus, for example, Montefiore has argued that in some instances ‘Thomas provides a text which may be more original than that of the Synoptic Gospels’.¹ He naturally employs criteria for making this assertion: the more detailed and vivid is earlier,² the secondary is sometimes more compressed,³ the simplest is to be preferred,⁴ and the like.

Even before the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, however, the existence of material parallel to, but independent of and possibly more original than the Synoptics had been postulated. This theory has been put forward especially with respect to the *Didache*,⁵ but Köster would extend it to include a considerable part of the Synoptic tradition found in the Apostolic Fathers.⁶

In the second place, there exists the possibility that our Synoptics themselves made use of parallel but independent traditions. There are at least three different theories to consider here.

¹ Hugh Montefiore and H. E. W. Turner, *Thomas and the Evangelists* (London, 1962), p. 52.

² *Ibid.* pp. 50 f.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 51 f.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 61–3.

⁵ See, for example, Richard Glover, ‘The *Didache*’s quotations and the Synoptic Gospels’, *N.T.S.* v (1958), 12–29. Glover thinks that the *Didache* did not use Matthew and Luke, but a collection of sayings comprising both ‘Q’ and ‘M’ material. The *Didache* sometimes preserves a more authentic form of a saying than do our canonical Gospels.

⁶ Helmut Köster, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* (Berlin, 1957). Köster’s view will be discussed more fully below. As an example pertinent to the present point, however, we may mention that in dealing with I Clem. 13. 2 and 46. 8, Köster concludes that the author of I Clement had access, even if indirectly, to the *Vorstufe* of the Synoptics. He thinks that at 46. 8, especially, Clement had a tradition related to Q rather than to our Synoptics themselves. See pp. 12–19.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE PROBLEM

(1) Several scholars have suggested that translation variants may be found within our Synoptics.¹ The point is that certain variations in wording, between, let us say, Matthew and Mark, can be explained as different translations of a common Aramaic word. Thus $\nu\eta\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\iota\nu$ (Mk. 2. 19*a*), $\nu\eta\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha\iota$ (Lk. 5. 34), and $\pi\epsilon\nu\theta\epsilon\iota\nu$ (Mt. 9. 15*a*) may be seen as 'variant renderings of the ambiguous Aramaic *'ith 'anne'*.² Dalman criticized a similar view when it was put forward by Resch,³ but the persistence of it cannot be ignored. We cannot deal with the ramifications of such a possibility here, but can only note that if a later Gospel could have had a translation of an Aramaic word other than that used in its main Gospel source, then presumably it must have had access to a tradition at least partially independent of the main Gospel source. The possibility of the existence of such independent traditions requires the search for criteria for determining relative antiquity.

(2) It has long been thought that there are places in which

¹ The principal works to be mentioned here are C. C. Torrey, *Our translated Gospels* (New York, 1936), and Matthew Black, *An Aramaic approach to the Gospels and Acts*³ (Oxford, 1967). Joachim Jeremias, *The parables of Jesus*, 2nd English ed., E.T. by S. H. Hooke (New York, 1963), has also noted what appear to be translation variants. This view has been supported by J. W. Doeve, 'Le Rôle de la tradition orale dans la composition des Évangiles synoptiques', *La Formation des Évangiles* (Bruges, 1957), pp. 72 f.; by Köster, *op. cit.* p. 40; and by W. G. Kümmel, *Einleitung in das neue Testament*¹³ (Heidelberg, 1964), p. 26.

² Jeremias, *op. cit.* (1st Eng. ed.), p. 42 n. 82. More examples of possible translation variants are given in Appendix 1 below.

³ Gustaf Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu* (Darmstadt, 1965), p. 35. See the English translation, *The words of Jesus*, E.T. by D. M. Kay (Edinburgh, 1902), pp. 43 f. Dalman writes as follows: 'The fact that Greek synonyms *may* often be traced back to one Hebrew word, though sometimes several Hebrew synonyms also may be discovered, in no way proves that a Hebrew word really lies behind the Greek synonyms. One might almost as well name an Aramaic or an Arabic word, and then in the same way proceed to argue an Aramaic or Arabic original. . . Only in the case of striking deviations among the variants could a testimony in favour of a Semitic original be inferred with *some* degree of certitude, provided there was found a Semitic term which perchance so solved the problem of the divergent readings, that the one appears, with good reason, to be a misunderstanding easily possible, the other the correct interpretation of the Semitic expression. Even then, however, it would remain questionable whether the divergent readings had not arisen through other causes, so that it is only by accident that a Semitic term appears to account for the deviation. This must indeed be always the most plausible supposition. . .' Although Resch wished to use 'translation variants' to prove a Hebrew rather than an Aramaic origin of the Gospels, Dalman's strictures of his position would apply also to any argument depending on variant translations from Aramaic.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE NEED FOR CRITERIA

the sources of our Synoptic Gospels overlap.¹ Thus at the Beelzebul controversy, Mark and Q are said to overlap. Sometimes Q and M are thought to have overlapped.² All such instances raise the problem of which of the overlapping traditions is earlier.

(3) The view of W. L. Knox³ and L. Cerfaux⁴ raises the possibility of overlapping traditions from another angle. These scholars have put forth the view that there existed small literary units anterior to our Gospels. It follows that one of the later Gospels could have followed such a unit where it paralleled his main Gospel source, and thus have preserved the small unit better than did the earlier Gospel. Cerfaux, in fact, declines to assert the absolute priority of one Gospel to another, and stresses their independence.⁵

Any theory which envisages the possibility of parallel but independent traditions' being available to the canonical evangelists must use criteria to distinguish the earlier from the later.

The Synoptic problem itself, though closely related to the possibility of independent but parallel traditions, deserves separate mention as an area of study which requires the criteria which we plan to investigate.

(1) The hypothesis that Matthew and Luke used Q independently requires such criteria in order to distinguish the more original form of a Q saying.⁶

(2) All more or less complicated solutions to the Synoptic problem must rely, in part at least, on such criteria.⁷ The view, for example, which envisages a highly developed oral tradition

¹ See B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels* (London, 1961), pp. 186–91. Besides the Beelzebul controversy (Mk. 3. 23–30 parr.), Streeter lists Mt. 10. 1–16 parr., Mk. 1. 1–8 parr., Mk. 1. 9–13, and Mt. 13. 31–3 parr.

² *Ibid.* pp. 281–5.

³ W. L. Knox, *The sources of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Henry Chadwick (2 vols.; Cambridge, 1953 and 1957).

⁴ L. Cerfaux, 'Les Unités littéraires antérieures aux trois premiers évangiles', *La Formation des Évangiles*, pp. 24–33.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 24 and 33.

⁶ See, for example, Streeter, *op. cit.* p. 183.

⁷ More or less complicated solutions to the Synoptic problem are not in short supply. See, for example, the six solutions which Heuschen lists of the many which have been offered to account for the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark (J. Heuschen, 'La Formation des Évangiles', *La Formation des Évangiles*, pp. 16 f.). He concludes that a simple theory of Matthew's dependence on Mark is not adequate to account for the evidence (p. 17).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE PROBLEM

opens the possibility that Luke or Matthew could, at a certain passage, have employed the oral tradition rather than Mark.¹ All forms of the Ur-Markus theory must reckon with the possibility that Matthew and Luke could have preserved the Ur-Gospel better than did Mark. The Ur-Gospel theory has had a long life, and may not be said to be dead even yet. Bultmann, for example, while not making much use of it, has never given it up. He remains open to the possibility that 'Matthew and Luke possessed Mark and the *Logia* in different recensions, and [thus] it is quite probable that the form of the Gospel of Mark used by them was earlier than the one with which we are familiar'.² Many other scholars have appealed to such a theory to account for what they consider to be secondary features in Mark *vis-à-vis* Matthew and/or Luke.³ All such appeals, needless to say, rest on an assurance that what is relatively early can be distinguished from what is relatively late.

(3) Most scholars who have dealt extensively with the Synoptic Gospels, whether explicitly accepting an Ur-Gospel theory or not, have found some passages in which either Matthew or Luke or both seem to have an earlier form than

¹ See Doeve, *op. cit.*

² Rudolf Bultmann, 'The New Approach to the Synoptic Problem', *Journal of Religion*, vi (1926), 338. Cf. also *Die Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien*⁴ (Berlin, 1961), p. 9 (English translation by F. C. Grant, 'The study of the Synoptic Gospels', in *Form Criticism* [New York, 1962], pp. 13 f.); *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*⁵ (Göttingen, 1961), pp. 7, 18 and often (English translation by John Marsh, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* [New York, 1963], pp. 6, 20).

³ We may give here only a few examples. See J. H. Scholten, *Das älteste Evangelium* (Elberfeld, 1869), p. 168; Bernhard Weiss, *Das Marcusevangelium und seine synoptischen Parallelen* (Berlin, 1872), p. vii and often (e.g., when contrasting Mk. 5. 11 with the Matthean parallel, he notes that it is 'augenfällig' that 'Marcus hier eine erleichternde und darum sekundäre Darstellung hat', p. 177); F. Spitta, *Die synoptische Grundschrift in ihrer Überlieferung durch das Lukasevangelium* (Leipzig, 1912), pp. 463 f. The view of P. Wernle (*Die synoptische Frage* [Tübingen, 1899]), who attributes instances in which Mark has a secondary form when compared with Matthew and Luke to textual revision of the text of Mark, is not really different from an Ur-Markus hypothesis. See p. 58. Sir John Hawkins was of a similar view. While wishing to reject the Ur-Markus hypothesis, he found about ten instances in which a later editor changed the Mark used by Matthew and Luke. See *Horae Synopticae*⁶ (Oxford, 1909), p. 152. A similar view is that of T. F. Glasson, 'Did Matthew and Luke use a "Western" text of Mark?' *Exp. Times*, LV (1943/4), 180-4 and *ibid.* LXXVII (1966), 120f. Hadorn (*Die Entstehung des Markus-Evangeliums* [Gütersloh, 1898]) also noted that the secondary matter in our Mark requires either an Ur-Markus hypothesis or the acceptance of Matthew's priority. He chose the latter course, however. See pp. 12, 159.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE NEED FOR CRITERIA

that in our Mark. To take a recent example, Köster thinks that Mt. 24. 30*b* retains the original form of Mark, while the present Mk. 13. 26 is later.¹ A more extensive list may be found in Appendix II.

(4) More fundamentally, however, the basic solution to the Synoptic problem which has formed the foundation for work on the Synoptics for over half a century has now been challenged, principally by B. C. Butler² and W. R. Farmer.³ Both Butler and Farmer have challenged, rightly to my view, the opinion that the two-document hypothesis can be established by appeal to such general considerations as the order of pericopes.⁴ Surely one response to this challenge is that the priority of Mark is to be proved by a comparison of it in individual passages with Matthew and Luke.⁵ Such a comparison, of course, requires criteria of relative antiquity and presupposes knowledge of the tendency of the tradition. Further, Farmer wishes to employ the criteria which have been in common use to show that they actually support Matthew's priority.⁶

This study is written with one eye on the problem we have just mentioned. In my view, the study of the Synoptic problem is at a stage at which the comparison of individual passages in the Gospels, with the appropriate criteria in hand, is necessary. It is for this reason, as we shall presently see, that the criteria are not derived from a comparison of the Synoptics with one another (as was done by Bultmann, for example), but are derived from an investigation of the post-canonical Synoptic tradition. Whatever criteria are derived may then be applied to the Synoptic Gospels themselves. This method should shed light on the Synoptic problem.

The ultimate need for criteria for testing relative antiquity, however, comes from the problem of the origins and development of Christian thought. As the form critics clearly perceived, the tradition developed not only after it first came to light in our earliest Gospel, but was developing already before it was

¹ Köster, *op. cit.* p. 188.

² B. C. Butler, *The originality of St Matthew* (Cambridge, 1951).

³ W. R. Farmer, *The Synoptic problem* (New York, 1964).

⁴ G. M. Styler, 'The priority of Mark', excursus IV in C. F. D. Moule, *The birth of the New Testament* (New York, 1962), p. 225, grants that 'formal relationships do not by themselves compel one solution to the synoptic problem'.

⁵ See the remarks by Styler, *ibid.* pp. 227-30. ⁶ Farmer, *op. cit.* pp. 227-8.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE PROBLEM

written and incorporated as we now have it. It is to be assumed that knowledge of the tendency of the tradition after it comes into view can be used to cast light on how it had already been developing.¹ Thus if proper criteria can be established, they can be used not only to test which of two or more parallel traditions available to us is the earlier, but also to indicate what the tradition most probably was like and what developments it most probably underwent before it reached the form in which we now have it. Here the question of oral tradition need not be decided.² We investigate written tradition because that is all that is available to us. Many scholars now think that there would have been little difference between written and oral tradition during the first century, however, so that the tendencies of the one are presumably the tendencies of the other.³ We must operate on this presumption, although it cannot be tested. Even if it should be the case that oral tradition was not so rigid as some seem to think, that does not of itself mean that oral tradition was a great deal different from written tradition, since written tradition itself was by no means inflexible, as we shall see.⁴

THE PRESENT SITUATION AND THE TASK

It is obvious, then, that criteria for determining the relative age of two or more parallel passages, based on knowledge of the tendency of the tradition, are needed. But are they not already

¹ Cf. F. C. Grant, 'Where form criticism and textual criticism overlap', *J.B.L.* LIX (1940), 14.

² This formulation stands in the closest agreement with that of Bultmann. After describing how laws of the development of tradition may be ascertained, he notes that 'if we are able to detect any such laws, we may assume that they were operative on the traditional material even before it was given its form in Mark and Q, and in this way we can infer back to an earlier stage of tradition than appears in our sources. Moreover it is at this point a matter of indifference whether the tradition were oral or written, because on account of the unliterary character of the material one of the chief differences between oral and written traditions is lacking'. *Die Geschichte*, p. 7 (E.T. p. 6).

³ This is implicit, for example, in Gerhardsson's stress on the accuracy of oral transmission. See *Memory and manuscript*, pp. 130 ff. So also F. C. Grant, *art. cit.* pp. 11-21.

⁴ It would be possible to enumerate other areas in which internal criteria for determining relative antiquity are used. See, for example, Brown's use of them in comparing John with the Synoptics in *The Gospel according to John* (i-xii) (New York, 1966), pp. 237-44.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE PRESENT SITUATION

available to us? Are not the tendencies of the tradition already so well known that firm criteria can be derived from them, and have these criteria not already been used in a meaningful way to illumine the problems which we have just outlined? It is certainly true that virtually every scholar who has dealt with the Synoptic tradition has employed criteria of the type which we have in view. It is, it appears, a common assumption today that these criteria have been derived, or at least confirmed, by studying bodies of material comparable to the Synoptics and that they represent universal laws of the development of material of the Synoptic type.¹

This generalization has been primarily reached through discussion with others who are interested in the New Testament. We may cite some statements in support of it, however. G. Bornkamm writes as follows: '[Form criticism] has shown that from the character of the Gospel tradition we can recognize reasonably clearly the laws and forms of the pre-literary oral tradition. . . We find numerous parallels to these forms and laws of tradition, particularly in the rabbi's method of teaching, in the apocalyptic tradition, but also in popular oral tradition in general.' See *Jesus of Nazareth* (E.T. by Irene and Fraser McLuskey with J. M. Robinson) (New York, 1960), p. 218. If by the phrase 'laws of tradition' Bornkamm means laws governing the development of tradition, he clearly thinks that such laws have been found in popular material outside the canon. It is this assumption, as we shall show below, which is incorrect.

A second example of this assumption is found in W. G. Kümmel, *Einführung in das neue Testament*¹³, pp. 21f. He writes: '[Form criticism] transferred to the material of the Synoptic tradition observations which had been made by literary-historical research in other areas, above all in the Old Testament literature (H. Gunkel, H. Gressmann). Popular tradition follows, in the reproduction and formation of its materials, fixed laws, which differ according to literary category (fairy tale, saga, historical narrative, hymn, saying with this or that aim, and the like).' Here it is supposed that each literary category has laws both of formation and transmission ('reproduction', *Wiedergabe*). The context of Kümmel's discussion shows that his view of form criticism is that its investigations of other literature had revealed laws of construction and transmission which apply also to the Synoptics. We shall show below that this view of what form criticism did is incorrect. See also the discussion of Klijn's view on p. 31 below.

¹ The word 'laws' in this work refers to generalizations based on behaviour which is observed to be more or less uniform; that is, it refers to the characteristic developments of the tradition. See further Bultmann's definition, p. 17 below, and the discussion on pp. 272 f. below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03131-8 - The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

E. P. Sanders

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE PROBLEM

It is further commonly assumed that these criteria have been applied systematically to the Synoptic Gospels, and that the differences among the Synoptic Gospels conform to these universal tendencies in such a way as to support the common solution to the Synoptic problem.

We may here briefly mention as an example a matter which will be discussed more fully in chapter IV. Kümmel (*op. cit.* pp. 29 f.) states that Mark's Greek is more popular and Semitic than that of Matthew and Luke. He considers this decisive proof for the priority of Mark. Such a statement assumes two things: (1) Research has shown that popular and Semitic Greek is improved in the course of the tradition, but that 'better' Greek is not made more popular and Semitic. (2) A review has been made of vulgarisms and Semitisms in the Synoptics, and the results point decisively toward Mark's priority; that is, there is not a significant number of instances in which Matthew or Luke has the more vulgar or Semitic text. Neither assumption is well founded, as we shall show below.

The assurance with which these or similar assumptions are held is easily seen in the work of many scholars today. We may take one example of this assurance. In discussing II Clem. 5. 2-4//Mt. 10. 16//Lk. 10. 3, Köster comments that 'der sekundäre Charakter dieser Stelle [in Clement] zeigt sich schliesslich auch noch darin, dass Petrus als Frager ausdrücklich genannt wird'.¹ He refers, as proof of the canon, to one passage, Mt. 15. 15//Mk. 7. 17, and cites Bultmann, *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, pp. 71 f. (E.T. pp. 67 f.). Actually, however, the criterion is by no means so clear. It is not difficult to find a passage in which Mark, rather than Matthew, explicitly names Peter (see Mt. 21. 20//Mk. 11. 21). In this instance, indeed, Bultmann recognized that the tendency of the tradition was by no means uniform, or rather that in some instances the general tendency was reversed.² It is questionable how much assurance should be laid on such a canon.

Despite the assurance with which certain criteria are sometimes used today, we must observe that, in point of fact, neither of the two assumptions upon which such assurance is based is justified. That is, it is not the case that the criteria have been established by exhaustive, or even by fairly comprehensive work on the relevant literature, nor is it the case that these criteria

¹ Köster, *op. cit.* p. 98.

² See the passage referred to by Köster.