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978-1-316-60377-2 - The Primitive Christian Calendar: A Study in the Making of the
Marcan Gospel: Volume I: Introduction & Text

Philip Carrington

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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

THE LITURGICAL THEORY OF ST MARK

This Introduction is the record of the various stages in the researches which led to the establishment of a relationship between the old Jewish Calendar, the composition of St Mark, the primitive Christian Calendar, and the chapter-enumerations in the oldest manuscripts. It began with the attempt to discover the principal lines of thought connecting one part of St Mark with another. The present writer never at any time cherished the notion that St Mark was a biography in the modern manner, intended to satisfy a purely historical interest; nor can he proceed to the opposite extreme, sometimes advocated to-day, that the first Christians had no historical curiosity, and were supremely indifferent to the historical facts about Jesus. The following propositions, perhaps, might be accepted as a guide to modern research:

- (a) The purpose of the writer was evangelistic; his supreme aim was to present Jesus as Son of Man and Son of God.
- (b) Much of the material which he used was current in the Church and well known to his readers, or hearers.
- (c) The book was designed to be used in church, and was therefore related to current ecclesiastical custom.

Such aims and objects do not exclude the historical; indeed they require the historical. Historicity was the essential quality of the evangelistic message; but not historicity or historical methods as we conceive them; historicity and historical methods as they conceived them.

1. THE MYSTERY OF THE SEED PARABLES

The point at which the present investigation began was the mystery of the Seed Parables, with regard to which many scholars confess that they are baffled. Their problem arises from the fact

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that St Mark insists with all the emphasis at his command that these parables have a meaning to which 'those outside' are completely blind. There is quite a battalion of Protestant scholars who cannot accept this view. Following A. Jülicher, they maintain that the parables are simple, and even obvious, sermon illustrations, and that St Mark is guilty of what I have heard described as 'gratuitous mystery-mongering'. The doctrine of spiritual blindness is supposed to be taken over from the anti-Jewish propaganda of the Gentile churches, according to which the Jews who crucified Jesus had been spiritually blinded, and their hearts hardened, in accordance with a mysterious divine decree which had been announced beforehand in the writings of the ancient prophets.

It is important to recognize that this 'anti-Semitic' doctrine actually existed. It was contained in the *Book of Testimonies*, and was widely spread among Christians from earliest times. It was well known in Rome before the Marcan gospel was composed; for Paul discussed it in his Epistle to the Romans. He would only accept it, however, in a much modified form; he did not agree that God had rejected 'his people whom he foreknew', but he conceded that 'a hardening in part has fallen on Israel' (xi. 2 and 25).

The *Book of Testimonies* is the name given by Dr Rendel Harris to a collection of passages from the Law and the Prophets drawn up in the earliest period of the Church to illustrate and prove certain propositions with regard to the new faith, especially of course the propositions which were regarded by the Jews as an 'offence'; that the Messiah died for our sins, and was buried, and rose again on the third day. In connexion with this it was not possible to overlook the supreme over-all mystery, that the Messiah had been rejected by his own people, who had been educated by the Law and the Prophets to accept him, and had been accepted by the Gentiles, who had been left without this education. This non-recognition by the Jews must have been part of the divine plan, Christians thought, and therefore must have been predicted by the Prophets. There was indeed no escape for them from this further proposition.

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THE MYSTERY OF THE SEED PARABLES

The Hebrew Scriptures provide an abundance of texts which condemn the unreceptivity of the chosen people; 'Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider' (Isa. i. 3); but the cardinal testimony of this kind occurs in the great sixth chapter of Isaiah in which the prophet describes a vision of God in the Jerusalem Temple and of the divine glory which fills heaven and earth. The prophet sees the 'King in his beauty', and hears the song of the seraphim; but Israel as a whole is blind. This 'Testimony' is constantly quoted by Christian writers, and it is closely associated in Mark with the Seed Parable, and with the use of parables by Jesus.

Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God:
But unto them that are without, all things are done in parables:
That seeing they may see, and not perceive;
And hearing they may hear, and not understand;
Lest haply they should turn again, and it should be forgiven them.
(Mark iv. 11-12; Isa. vi. 9-10)

The significance is clear. In the days of Isaiah Israel had been blind to the glory of God in the temple worship and indeed in the whole panorama of creation. It was blind now to the glory of God in the gospel of Jesus. The paradoxical turn of the language, which is so shocking to the literal and logical mind, was not the invention of Mark or even of Jesus, but comes straight from Isaiah himself; and it is characteristic of the old Hebrew theology which never shrank from attributing to the divine purpose those results which follow from a chain of consequences. It is a hard saying. Mark does not say, however, that Jesus adopted the method of teaching in parables so as to conceal his meaning. What he says is that there are certain minds to which *everything* comes in riddles—for that is what the word parable means—;¹ they understand nothing.

Mark repeats from page to page the language about eyes that see not, and ears that hear not, and hearts that are hardened and understand not. The school of critics who follow Jülicher believe that Mark has misunderstood Jesus, and that there is no great

¹ 'Parable', 'proverb', 'riddle', are words of similar use and meaning.

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mystery about these parables. We can afford to waive this question at this point so far as their original purpose is concerned; but we cannot waive it so far as Mark is concerned. For Mark, at any rate, there was a deeper meaning which does not lie on the surface (not even in the interpretation appended to the first parable). We are not likely to understand the aim and purpose of the evangelist until we have grasped what that meaning is. Anyone who claims to interpret or criticize this gospel must bring forward some explanation of it.

2. EXAMINATION OF THE EVIDENCE

The passages which refer to this deeper meaning may be grouped under three heads, which we may allude to as the Three Mountains.

1. *The First Mountain.* The episode of the First Mountain follows the council held by the Pharisees and Herodians to 'destroy' Jesus. Widespread popular support is demonstrated by the crowds who come to hear him preaching by the seaside. He goes up into 'the Mountain' where he chooses Twelve Disciples (iii. 13).

The Parable of the Sower is then delivered from a boat on the Lake of Galilee (iv. 3). No explanation is offered; for the explanations, such as they are, take place when he is alone with his disciples. Four miniature parables follow these explanations (the Lamp, the Hidden Thing, the Measure, and He who Hath). Then come two more Seed Parables, making a total of seven parables in all.

The Parable of the Sower is *in situ*; it is related to its context, but the explanations and additional parables were appended because of their topical interest. They form one of those collections of sayings which, we think, were put together by teachers or evangelists for practical use in their work. It would be natural for a teacher to make such a collection on the necessity of insight and understanding in the pupil.

2. *The Second Mountain.* The beginning of this episode echoes the opening passages of the First Mountain. The Twelve who were

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chosen have now been sent out to preach. Herod, whose party was then mentioned, has now heard of Jesus. The Passion of John the Baptist is narrated; and this is followed by the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Walking on the Water. This event ends with the strange remark, 'They were sore amazed in themselves; for they understood not concerning the loaves, but their heart was hardened' (vi. 51-2); the latter phrase being taken directly from the Testimony from Isaiah which was quoted in connexion with the Sower.

It is generally recognized that the Feeding of the Four Thousand is a duplicate of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and for our present purposes we may treat it as a second account of the same event. It is followed by the Demand for a Sign (which John connects with the Five Thousand) and the caution about the Leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod. Then comes a whole battery of mystery-sayings,

Do ye not yet perceive neither understand?
 Have ye your heart hardened?
 Having eyes, see ye not? And having ears, hear ye not?
 And do ye not remember? (viii. 17-18)

and, after recounting the statistics of both miracles, he adds, 'Do ye not yet understand?' Understand what? How often have I attempted to find a meaning for this question!

3. *The Third Mountain.* The Third Mountain is that of the Transfiguration. It is preceded by echoes of those words of Herod which open the episode of the Second Mountain. (It will be shown later on how Mark's Gospel is built on a series of threefold repetitions linked by various subtle connexions.) It also echoes the reference to John the Baptist. It then goes on to Peter's salutation of Jesus as the Messiah, which Jesus commands his disciples to keep secret. He then unfolds the teaching that 'the Son of Man must suffer many things...and be killed, and after three days rise again'; to which Mark adds this extraordinary comment, 'And he spake the saying openly' (viii. 31-2).

What is meant by speaking the word 'openly'? Nothing at all, unless we take it in connexion with the mystery-sayings of the

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Sower and of the Feeding of the Five (Four) Thousand. But if we link it up with those, its meaning becomes luminously clear. There is no riddle or enigma now: here is the plain truth which underlies the riddles and enigmas. *The Son of Man must die and rise again.*

The word 'plainly' is found in the same sense in John xvi. 29: 'His disciples say, Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb' (the word in both cases is *parrēsīā*). This understanding of the words gives meaning to all the mystery-sayings from beginning to end. And it reveals the structure of the Marcan gospel.

The view which forces itself on the mind is that the death and resurrection of the Son of Man is announced in parables after the events of the First Mountain, enacted sacramentally at the Second Mountain, and revealed 'openly' at the Third Mountain. The sowing of the seed opens the process which finds a natural climax in the breaking of bread. We are studying a sequence of thoughts which our author assures us has a logical and consistent, but mystical and secret meaning; and we have stumbled on an idea which seems to be the key to that meaning.

3. SEED-TIME AND HARVEST

The death-and-resurrection theme is one that was naturally associated with seed-time and harvest. This association is fairly well known to modern readers through the writings of Sir James Frazer, Mr A. M. Hocart, and others, on the ritual of the divine king or the dying god. The series of ideas was very much at home in Syria. We must guard ourselves carefully, however, against any suggestion that Jesus was a Jewish corn-spirit. The preposterous idea that the gospel is merely another form of the kind of ritual we get in the cult of Attis and Adonis is not in line with the facts of history. Jesus died at the spring festival in Jerusalem on Nisan 14; Julius Caesar died at the same season of the year, on a corresponding day in the Roman calendar called by them the 'Ides of March'. Both were deified by their followers. Both are fully historical figures.

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No myth or ritual has been borrowed from pagan sources and incorporated into the gospel; but pagan and Christian and Hebrew thinking on such points were all coloured by the spirit of the age. There was a mystical and symbolical way of thought which was natural to men at that time, and found expression in art and poetry and ritual and drama and religion. In the springtime life returns from the underworld in leaves and grasses and flowers; when the harvest comes, it is cut down in the shape of fruit and grain; it dies, but it will come again. Such is the destiny of man himself. Old Nature, who is the mother of mankind, reflects in her many-coloured drama the destiny of her divine son. Such is the truth which underlies the old way of thought.

But we must return to our gospel passages, and examine them again; and first we must note the threefold pattern which ramifies through the whole gospel. There are Three Mountains which mark the three points of highest dramatic interest in the Galilean story. There are Three Seed Parables which follow the episode of the First Mountain. There are Three Announcements of the Passion which begin at the Third Mountain; and each of these serves to introduce a collection of sayings of Jesus on what we might call the philosophy of the Cross and Passion.

The continual reference to the 'triads' of Mark may at first prove rather irritating; the index on pp. 94-5 shows that they are a simple fact. A recognition of the triads is equivalent to a recognition of the structure of the gospel.

The minor triads (which are confined to a single section) have no bearing on our study at this point; but the major triads are of great importance. A major triad consists in the repetition of some striking or important phrase three times at different points of the gospel. All critics have observed the threefold repetition of the Passion-announcement; and the threefold announcement of the seeing of the Son of Man (or Kingdom). Analytical study soon finds many more, such as the 'beloved son', or the breaking of the bread. A dramatic and convincing one is the reference to the right hand and the left; or the still more subtle one of the right hand without reference to the left.

It is to be feared that many moderns will regard this exquisite

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literary technique as 'artificial'. It is no more artificial than the hexameter of Homer, the *terza-rima* of Dante, or the blank verse of Milton. It serves to distinguish passages that have some connexion in thought, and to link them together by verbal associations. Further detail will be found in the note on the Triadic Structure (p. 90).

The first Seed Parable is the Parable of the Sower (Mark iv. 3–9). We may distinguish, first of all, its literal meaning which is superficial and pictorial. We may pass secondly to its ostensible meaning which is given in the explanatory passage (iv. 14–20); I owe this word 'ostensible' to a Hindu scholar, Dr Ananda Coomaraswamy, who made it clear to me that, in ancient thought, a saying of the order of a parable might have an intellectual or moral interpretation which would be complete and satisfying as far as it went in its own dimension, and yet was incomplete and unsatisfactory from a point of view which included depth and mystical reality.

The 'ostensible' meaning of the Sower Parable has to do with the proclamation of the Word of God or Gospel, as Jesus began it in Galilee. As the explanation rightly says, 'The sower soweth the word'. But it is obvious from the further cautions of Mark that this explanation is not regarded as revealing the mystery. An analogy is established between 'word' and 'seed', or 'word' and 'light'; but why is it assumed that the 'word' has in it something corresponding to fertility or luminosity? On what basis does the analogy repose? For the idea seems to be that mere contemplation of the germinating seed should of itself suggest or reveal mysteries to the seeing eye.

The second Seed Parable (Mark iv. 26–9) is usually called 'the Seed Growing Secretly'. It is hard to see that it has any special ostensible meaning of its own. Sometimes it is interpreted to mean that the development of the gospel, or growth of the Kingdom, comes slowly and by natural stages. Sometimes the 'suddenness' of the harvest is emphasized. We might leave it for the moment with the observation that it seems to do no more than provide a complete picture of the whole drama of seed-time and harvest. Matthew and Luke omit it; and yet it must have served some important purpose in Mark's design.