

# From Jesus to The Gospels

61

by Barnabas Lindars, S.S.F.

Three witnesses of the same event hardly ever give exactly the same account of it, but there is usually a sufficient measure of agreement between them to ensure the general veracity of their testimony, even if many of the details remain irreconcilable. This seems to be true of the first three Gospels. The triple tradition at first sight gives reassurance. The differences between them appear to confirm the essential truth of the account, as they suggest that the tradition has been independently attested.

If this is the impression which first strikes the reader of the Synoptic Gospels, more careful study will soon shake his confidence. When the triple tradition is subjected to word-for-word comparison in the Greek, it soon becomes apparent that the similarities are too close to be explained in terms of independent testimony. The Synoptic Gospels are actually *interdependent*. One evangelist has used the work of another. This means that the differences between them are not due to independent tradition, but are deliberate divergences on the part of the evangelists. And if the two later ones have been so lacking in fidelity to their common source, how can we have any certainty that the original has not been equally unfaithful to the primitive tradition on which it is based? And if that is so, how can we ever get back to the truth of the matter, and find out what Jesus really did say and do in his life on earth?

This is the essence of the Synoptic Problem, and it has been the central issue before New Testament scholars for the past 150 years. The last word has still not been said on this subject. But during this time the tools of research have been greatly improved. New factors have come to light. Of these, the Dead Sea Scrolls are the most spectacular, but by no means the only, example. What is more important, however, is the change in the climate of opinion. The days are gone when these studies were undertaken with an apologetic motive, to promote a preconceived dogmatic position. The attitude is rigorously self-critical. The so-called 'assured results' of biblical criticism are constantly subjected to re-examination. Nothing is taken on trust, and new ideas are put forward with due reserve.

In order to take the temperature of contemporary scholarship on this subject, the Sixteenth Session of the Colloquium Biblicum at Louvain in 1965 was devoted to a series of studies, which have now been published under the title *De Jésus aux Évangiles: tradition*

*et rédaction dans les Évangiles synoptiques*.<sup>1</sup> The twelve essays contained in it are all (with one exception) by Catholic scholars. The collection is notable alike for the high standard of scholarship and for the consistency of the contributions, which show an exceptional unity of style and outlook. But this is not at all the monolithic unity of the Catholic Church over against the rest, for the critical assumptions of the writers are precisely those current in the best Protestant scholarship, to which they constantly make reference, and to which indeed they are deeply indebted. It is, then, not as a Catholic 'line' that this book is worth careful attention, but as a very able presentation of the prevailing currents in the world of scholarship as a whole.

Obviously the first question is that of literary priority: which Gospel came first? Tradition says Matthew, most modern scholars say Mark. English readers tend to feel that there is an ecclesiastical line-up here. Dom B. C. Butler's *The Originality of St Matthew* (1951) upheld the traditional view, against Canon B. H. Streeter's *The Four Gospels* (1924), which argued for Mark. The matter is complicated by the fact that everyone agrees that Luke follows Mark for the triple tradition, even though he has other material (source Q) in common with Matthew. So, if Matthew is prior to Mark, it is necessary to postulate an earlier edition (*Ur-Markus*) used by all three, but best preserved by Matthew, although his rich store of additional source-material has caused him to abbreviate where *our* Mark expands. This *Ur-Markus* might then be regarded as the work of Matthew the apostle himself, and the traditional view is then (in a reduced sense) upheld. This view has a strong advocate in Prof. X. Léon-Dufour, whose essay opens the collection under review. But in arguing the case he is careful to say that he does not do so 'pour des raisons d'ordre disciplinaire', but 'seulement par exigence critique'.

But it looks as if the priority of Mark will win the day. Dom Swithun McLoughlin grasps the nettle by examining in detail the verbal agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark. They may seem impressive at first sight, but they lose their importance on closer examination. If due allowance is made for errors to the text which have crept in at an early stage in the course of transmission, it remains most probable that both Matthew and Luke knew Mark in the form with which we are familiar. So we are back again with our original problems. Why alter Mark? And how can we be sure that even Mark was faithful to the sources? As Professor I. de la Potterie reminds us in his introduction to the collection, the priority of Mark has been the working hypothesis of most scholars for the last fifty years, even though it continues to be to some extent an open problem. Indeed, one of the strongest arguments in its favour is the fact that it has proved so fruitful as a basis for further research. But the progress of criticism has not followed what is really the logical

<sup>1</sup>*Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* XXV, edited by I. de la Potterie. J. Duculot, Gembloux/P. Lethielleux, Paris, 1967.

order. We can see *now* that, given the priority of Mark and the differences between the evangelists, logically the next point to ascertain is the *intention* of the evangelists, first that of Matthew and Luke by comparison with Mark, and then (more delicate operation) that of Mark himself on the methodological principles uncovered in the process. This is the field of *Redaktionsgeschichte*, which is a feature of more recent study: the discernment of the dominant intention or individual interpretation of each evangelist. But in fact the first result of synoptic criticism historically was an atomistic approach. Each smallest unit of tradition was examined in isolation by the method of form criticism (*Formgeschichte*), the chief exponents being M. Dibelius and R. Bultmann. As the tendency of this method placed all the emphasis on the setting of the units of tradition in the pastoral and evangelistic life of the Church (the *Sitz im Leben*), the impression soon gained ground that nothing could be traced back to Jesus himself at all. This impression is of course exaggerated and largely false, but it was encouraged inevitably by the destructive effect of this atomistic approach.

Wisely the authors of our symposium have attended first to what is logically prior, namely *Redaktionsgeschichte*. F. Neiryneck, following the post-Bultmannian school in Germany,<sup>1</sup> shows how particular teaching interests dictate the way in which Matthew has handled his sources. J. Delorme disentangles Mark from his long association with the questionable 'messianic secret',<sup>2</sup> and speaks of him as a missionary vividly conscious of the relation between the Christ-event and the life of the Church, and anxious for the lessons of the Gospel to be taken to heart. A. George shows how the author of Luke-Acts has schematized the whole material to correspond with successive steps in the mystery of salvation.<sup>3</sup> To summarize so briefly cannot do justice to these three essays. But at least it may show that *the intention of the evangelists is not foreign to the nature of the material which they handle*. They may have adapted and edited the source-material for their own ends, but their major concern is to present the faith to which that material bears witness. In spite of all the changes in the course of transmission, it is likely that something solid has remained. Thus *Redaktionsgeschichte* (the third step in the progress from Jesus to the Gospels) is a witness to the seriousness and integrity of those who handle the traditions about Jesus. This at once suggests that at the second stage (the pre-synoptic tradition uncovered by *Formgeschichte*) there has been a like seriousness and integrity. There are grounds for greater confidence, against the scepticism induced by the first successes of form criticism.

We can see this better if we bear in mind the relation between the new teaching needs which the Gospels are designed to meet, and the

<sup>1</sup>See especially *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, by G. Bornkam, G. Barth and H. J. Held, 1963.

<sup>2</sup>Wrede's *Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (1901) has had a lasting influence.

<sup>3</sup>The essay is largely a critique of H. Conzelmann's *The Theology of Luke*, 1960.

original teaching needs for which the oral tradition grew up. It was one of the axioms of the form critics that all the individual units—whether paradigms, tales or legends—actually owe their survival to their value as illustrative material in the course of teaching. We need only to mention the obvious connection of the Feeding of the Multitude (not treated in detail in this volume) with the Christian practice of the Eucharist to be sure that this is right. We can also agree with another axiom, that moral teachings are likely to have been preserved separately, in the form of lists of things to remember, so that collections of sayings such as we have in the Sermon on the Mount are likely to be primitive. The Q source appears to be something of this kind. The beginning of the Gospel, as a form of literature, might be a similar collection of the illustrative material as a preacher's handbook. If this had been the case, we should have had a shapeless collection like the recently discovered Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*. This contains much material in common with the Synoptic Gospels, but is probably independent of them, as it makes no attempt to follow the same form. In fact, it is probable that various collections of this kind existed in early times (perhaps referred to in the opening verses of Luke). These would not be subject to such careful control as eventually became necessary, so that some distortions of fact, and even wholly extraneous matter, might find their way into them. To some extent we must assume that such matter has been included in the canonical Gospels, like the Coin in the Fish's Mouth (Matthew 17, 24-27), which has parallels in pagan literature. The process of canonization came about precisely to put a check on increasing corruption of the tradition.

But the collections we have are *not* just loosely strung together in this way. The results of *Redaktionsgeschichte* have shown that the Synoptic Gospels are creative works, composed with a definite plan and purpose. In fact, it is even possible that Mark was the originator of the Gospel form in the strict sense. *The Synoptic Gospels thus indicate a transition in the transmission of the traditions about Jesus. It is the change from collections of illustrative traditions and memorable teaching to a presentation of the life of Jesus the Messiah which makes a teaching impact as a whole, and not just in its individual units.* Thus Matthew's modifications of Mark hang together. There is a consistency about his handling of Mark which gives unity and direction to his Gospel as a complete work. The same is true of Luke. The effect of this process is, in one sense, a return to the beginning of the primitive stage. For the various units of tradition are drawn together into the pattern of the original proclamation of the Gospel—that Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God, that he died and rose again and was exalted to the right hand of the Father, and that *therefore* the Age of the Kingdom has dawned. The teaching consists precisely in enabling men to live as members of the Kingdom. This fact is constant, though changing conditions (entry into the Gentile world, delay of the *parousia*, the

breach between the Church and the synagogue) cause considerable expansions and adaptations of the teaching. The growth of a body of illustrative material from the life of Jesus is geared to this aim of teaching the way of life in the Kingdom; and the Gospel form draws this material into the pattern of the primitive *kerygma* in the light of these newer needs. There is a vital connexion between the traditions about Jesus and the life of the Church, as indicated above with reference to Delorme's essay on Mark, which helps to close the gap between the Jesus of history and the stage uncovered by form criticism.

The rest of the volume is devoted to specific studies, in which representative passages are subjected to detailed examination in the light of these principles. Two of these are concerned with 'set pieces', the Community Rule of Matthew 18 (P. Bonnard), and the Little Apocalypse of Mark 13 (J. Lambrecht). In each case recognition of the practical purposes of the evangelist in assembling the material at his disposal allows the reader to pierce through it to the living tradition of the words of Jesus in the early Church. These include, among other things, indisputable dominical pronouncements, both of the mercy and of the judgment of God, in relation to the Messianic Age. And for both these elements the position of Jesus himself is central, so that the proclamation of the kingdom is inextricably bound up with his own Person. Thus the way is opened up for a christology based on authentic words of Jesus.

Besides direct teaching and instruction by parables, there are also the striking incidents of the life of Jesus, which were remembered by the Church and introduced by way of example in the course of parenesis. M. Sabbe provides a study of the Baptism of Jesus, B. M. F. van Iersel the Call of Levi, and A.-M. Denis the Walking on the Water. All three episodes tend to disappear behind the parenetic development. The Baptism, so full of evocative theological overtones, remains an event which can never be disentangled with certainty, as fact and interpretation are inextricably fused. The Call of Levi is too much a matter of the *typical* call story to be treated as a straight historical account. The Walking on the Water cannot be clearly distinguished from the Stilling of the Storm, and yet it springs to life when put in relation with the special Markan theme of the conquest of the demonic powers. In all three the historical nucleus remains hidden, and the exegete will caution the reader to maintain a discreet reserve. But they illustrate the theological concerns of the evangelists, and so provide yet another avenue to the apprehension of the meaning of Christ.

One of the writers points out that the title of the symposium should have been put the other way round, from the Gospels to Jesus. The work of scholarship begins with what perhaps appear to be merely academic questions. But it leads to confrontation with the person of Jesus himself. It is an existential meeting which compels a decision.