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WHAT IS A GOSPEL?

In reading or interpreting any writing, whether ancient or modern, the first step must always be to determine what kind or genre of writing it is. We do not read a poem and approach it as if it were a piece of history. When we pick up a novel, even before we have any idea at all of its contents, we have certain expectations about the kind of writing it is. The novelist may, of course, surprise us by breaking some of the accepted conventions. But if our novel turns out to be totally unlike other novels we have read, we shall be very confused indeed; we may not be able to read it with enjoyment or understanding.

What is a gospel? How do we know what kind of writing it is? We form a judgement about the genre of a writing quite instinctively by comparing it with other similar writings with which we are familiar. So what were the expectations of the first readers of the gospels? Did they assume that they were biographies, or histories, or travel tales, or religious propaganda? Paul's readers came to his letters with clear expectations, for the letter genre was well-known in the first century AD. The first readers of Revelation were less bewildered by this writing than many modern readers, for they were acquainted with the form of Jewish apocalypses.

The gospels raise a whole series of interesting questions. Are they intended by the evangelists to be read as accurate records of the life of Jesus? Or are they theological treatises cast very loosely in a narrative framework? Were the evangelists simply editors, compilers, or anthologists? Or were they self-conscious authors? Are the gospels stories whose purpose is to engage the reader whose understanding or knowledge is expected to progress from the beginning to the end of the narrative?

These questions will be discussed in this chapter. Unless at least provisional answers are found, there is a real risk that the gospels will not be

properly understood. In the past inappropriate answers to these questions have sometimes led to a good deal of misunderstanding. Many readers of the gospels have assumed that they are intended to be accurate records of the life of Jesus, perhaps from eyewitnesses. They are then very puzzled by the differing accounts of the same incident in two or more gospels.

In this chapter we shall consider several different ways of approaching the gospels. For a long period in the nineteenth century the gospels were seen as historically reliable records or as biographies. In the early decades of the twentieth century the gospels came to be seen as anthologies of traditions which had been shaped by the life and faith of the early Christian communities in which they were transmitted. The gospels were 'proclamation' and not in any sense 'records' of the past. Following the Second World War attention turned to the distinctive emphases of the individual evangelists. Finally, and most recently, many scholars have used insights drawn from modern literary criticism and interpreted the gospels as stories with characters and dramatic plots.

It is worth noting at the outset that scholars have often mistakenly assumed that these are mutually exclusive ways of approaching the gospels. In our opening chapter we have already emphasized that 'story' and 'significance' are intertwined. We shall consider this point further at the end of this chapter.

The gospels as biographies

Is the literary genre of the gospels closely comparable with some Old Testament or Jewish writings, or with Graeco-Roman writings? Until recently, the generally accepted view was that the form of the gospels was unique and that Mark had no literary models at all. Discussion of these questions is not new. In the middle of the second century in his *Dialogue with Trypho* Justin Martyr referred to the gospels as 'memoirs of the apostles', thus aligning them with Xenophon's well-known 'memoirs' or 'biography' of Socrates. However, fifty years later Clement of Alexandria wrote, 'John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain . . . and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual gospel.' Clement was insisting that the Fourth Gospel should not be read as if it were comparable with Matthew, Mark, and Luke as a life of Jesus, or as a memoir of the apostles;

its form was distinctive and it should be approached with quite different expectations.

■ In the nineteenth century the gospels were often assumed to be biographies or accurate historical records. Many writers attempted to stitch together pieces from all four gospels in order to write a modern biography of Jesus. Quite often psychological explanations of the motives and intentions of Jesus were provided. Gaps in our knowledge were often filled out with imaginative reconstructions. For example, Luke 2: 40–52, the only passage in the gospels which tells us anything about the childhood of Jesus, was often filled out with intelligent (and at times unintelligent) guesswork about ‘the hidden years of Jesus’.

■ On this general approach, Peter’s confession of the Messiahship of Jesus at Mark 8: 27–30 was seen as a crucial turning point in the life of Jesus. In the opening chapters of Mark the miraculous deeds of Jesus are prominent, his teaching (which is limited in extent) is given mainly to the crowds, and there is very little discussion of his Messiahship. But after Peter’s confession there is a clear change. Jesus frequently teaches the disciples, but rarely the crowds. In his teaching, his Messiahship and in particular his impending passion become much more prominent. There are very few healings.

■ If Mark’s gospel is read as a biography of Jesus, it is natural to ask why Peter’s confession, ‘You are the Christ’, led to a change in the tactics of Jesus. The usual answer given in the nineteenth century ran as follows: following the persistent failure of the crowds to grasp his intention, Peter’s reply encouraged Jesus to concentrate his attention on the disciples in the hope that ultimately they might be more responsive than the crowds. This analysis of the motives of Jesus is based squarely on the assumption that Mark is a chronologically accurate biography of Jesus.

■ In 1915 the American scholar C. W. Votaw made a serious attempt to put this long-standing approach to the gospels on a proper scholarly footing. He compared the gospels with ancient popular biographies, especially Arrian’s *Discourses of Epictetus*, Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, and Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*.

■ However, within a decade or so this approach to the gospels as biographies was abandoned quite suddenly. Why was there such a dramatic shift in scholarly opinion? Under the influence of form criticism (see below, pp. 27–9), the traditions behind the gospels were linked closely to the needs

of the early Christian communities, especially their missionary preaching, catechetical instruction, argument with opponents, and worship. It was frequently claimed that the early church was so taken up with its proclamation of the Risen Christ that it was not interested at all in the past of Jesus. On this view the gospels stemmed from the proclamation of the early church and should not in any sense be seen as 'memoirs' or 'records'.

Rudolf Bultmann, the most influential New Testament scholar at that time, reacted vigorously against nineteenth-century scholars who had made a reconstructed biographical account of the life and personality of Jesus the very heart of the Christian message. For Bultmann the Risen Christ was central to Christian faith, not 'gentle Jesus meek and mild', not indeed the historical Jesus at all. Bultmann insisted that in its missionary preaching the early church was not concerned with more than the mere fact that Jesus of Nazareth had existed. The gospels may tell us a few things about the life and the teaching of Jesus, but this was, as it were, incidental or even contrary to their original intention.

To many of the form critics the very word 'biography' was like a red rag to a bull. For a long time nearly all the standard books on the gospels stated confidently that the gospels are not biographies. It was often said that Mark was a Passion narrative with an extended introduction. In other words Mark was seen as an exposition in narrative form of the preaching of the early church with its sharp focus on the significance of the cross and the resurrection. For the form critics the traditions behind the gospel and the gospels themselves were concerned almost entirely with the 'significance' of Jesus and hardly at all with 'story'.

It eventually became clear that some of the form critics had overreacted against the tendency prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century to make Jesus into a 'nice Victorian gentleman', or into a hero whose example could be imitated. In their over-emphasis on the theological intention of the gospel traditions, many form critics seriously confused ancient and modern conventions in biographical writing. They insisted that the main features of biographical writing are missing in the gospels: the evangelists are not concerned with precise chronology; they do not describe the personal appearance of Jesus; they do not attempt to unravel the development of his personality, nor do they set Jesus in the historical context of his own day.

In 1974 I defended an approach which was then unfashionable. I insisted

that the gospels must be read against the backdrop, not of *modern* biographical writing, but of their own times. The features of biographies which were said by the form critics to be missing from the gospels are all part of the expectations with which a modern reader approaches a biography, but they were not hallmarks of ancient biographical writing.

● A careful study of the methods of the Greek and Roman biographers leads to a positive conclusion of some importance. Even though ancient biographers did not trace character development and rarely summed up their subject's character in their own words, they were interested in the character of a person and knew how to portray it by using an indirect method of characterization. They allowed the actions and words of a person to speak for themselves. This simple and rather obvious technique was widely used even in sophisticated ancient biographical writing with its long literary tradition. So if we find that the gospels appear to portray the character of Jesus by reporting his actions and words, we are certainly not (as some of the form critics would have us believe) misunderstanding their intention.

● Richard Burridge (1992) has undertaken a full-scale comparison of the gospels and Graeco-Roman 'lives'. He underlines the extent to which there is a clear family resemblance. Burridge accepts that while the gospels do diverge from Graeco-Roman biographies in some respects, they do not do so to any greater extent than ancient biographies differ from one another.

● Nonetheless, it is worth noting that some features of Mark's gospel would have puzzled readers familiar with the conventions of ancient biographical writing: the evangelist's enigmatic opening which sets out 'the beginning of the gospel' as the fulfilment of prophecy and seems to assume that his readers know something about Jesus; his very full account of the last days of Jesus; and his curiously abrupt ending. With the possible exception of the story of the death of John the Baptist (Mark 6: 14–29 = Matt. 14: 1–12), the gospels do not use the stock in trade of the ancient biographer, anecdotes which are intended merely to satisfy curiosity or to entertain the reader.

● There is little doubt, however, that early Christian readers of the gospels did read them as biographies. Matthew and Luke extended the trend set by the earliest evangelist, Mark: with their stories of the birth of Jesus and their more polished style and structure, the genre of the two later gospels is even more clearly that of an ancient biography than Mark.

As we shall see in Chapter 6, John's gospel differs considerably from the other three gospels, and is probably not directly dependent on them. However when the four gospels are set alongside all the other 'gospels' and related writings which flourished for a time in some circles in the early church (see Chapter 7), it is their similarities rather than their differences which are striking. In terms of its literary genre, John's gospel belongs to the same tradition as Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

The gospels, then, should certainly not be compared with *modern* biographies. Comparison with ancient biographies has established the gospels' resemblance to them in terms of their literary genre, and underlined their 'story' element. The gospels are undeniably Graeco-Roman biographies, though their distinctive features should not be overlooked.

Do Old Testament and later Jewish writings provide close parallels? Some parts of the Old Testament, especially the portrayal of David in I and II Samuel, the Elijah-Elisha cycles of traditions, and some of the 'biographical' traditions about the prophets provide partial parallels. But no part of the Old Testament is closely comparable with the genre of the gospels, or with their concentration on the teaching and actions of one person and of his varied relationships with different groups of followers and opponents.

Nor do we fare much better when we consider later Jewish writings. The Qumran community was established close to the eleven caves where most of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. It was founded by the Teacher of Righteousness whose teaching was respected and retained. But we know very little about the Teacher's life and there are no Qumran writings remotely comparable with the gospels.

The gospels as history: source criticism

The second half of this book is concerned with the question: What can the historian say about the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth? Questions of this kind have been asked only since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. H. S. Reimarus, the father of modern historical inquiry into the gospels, recognized that by pressing rigorously historical questions he would be perceived to be undermining traditional Christianity, so he decided not to allow his writings to be published in his lifetime. Six years

after his death in 1768, the philosopher—theologian Lessing began to publish extracts from Reimarus's writings anonymously under the title *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*. In 1788 Lessing published his own book about the origin of Matthew and its relationship to Mark and Luke. Once the possibility of a literary relationship between these three gospels was accepted, the quest for the earliest gospel and for sources behind the gospels began. It was driven by the assumption that the earliest gospel or source would have the greatest *historical* value in reconstruction of the teaching and intention of Jesus. And so began intensive historical study of the gospels and their sources which continues to this day.

Historical issues had been considered in a limited way in the sixteenth century. Martin Luther was well aware of mistakes and inconsistencies in Scripture, as was Origen over a thousand years earlier. Luther recognized that Matt. 27: 9 mistakenly cited Jeremiah for Zechariah. He knew that there was a serious discrepancy between Matthew and John over the date of the cleansing of the temple: Matthew placed it at the end of the ministry of Jesus, John at the beginning. But Luther refused to settle such questions, insisting that they did not affect the proclamation which was the primary concern of the evangelists.

Not all Luther's colleagues took the same relaxed line. Andreas Osiander was convinced that proven contradictions in the gospels would undermine faith, so with great ingenuity he tried to harmonize the apparent discrepancies. This led him to conclude that Jesus must have been crowned with thorns twice, and that Peter must have warmed himself four times in the high priest's courtyard! Such harmonizations became impossible once it was recognized at the end of the eighteenth century that there is a close literary relationship between the gospels.

Scholars searched intensively for a hypothesis which would account for both the similarities and the differences between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In 1835 Karl Lachmann built on and developed earlier proposals, and offered a solution which eventually won wide acceptance. On this view, which came to be known as Marcan priority, Mark's gospel was not the Cinderella among the gospels, as it had been in the early church, but the first gospel to have been written. It was therefore the gospel with the highest claims to be accepted as a reliable historical source.

Marcan priority

Why did Mark so quickly overtake Matthew and Luke in scholarly esteem? The reasons are worth setting out briefly. (For a more detailed discussion of the relationships between Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the synoptic problem—it will be necessary to consult one of the standard Introductions to the New Testament listed in the Bibliography.) There are five main reasons, not all of which were advanced by Lachmann, why Marcan priority is widely accepted by scholars as the most plausible solution of the synoptic problem.

(i) It is not at all difficult to see why both Matthew and Luke should want to expand Mark's much shorter gospel with further material about the life and teaching of Jesus to which they had access. But it is less easy to explain the reverse procedure. Why should Mark want to abbreviate either Matthew or Luke, or both? If he has done so, he has left out nearly every verse of the Sermon on the Mount, but he has managed to find room to expand Matthew with details which seem quite unimportant.

In the example set out below, Mark contains a number of additional phrases, most of which add little or nothing to the corresponding account in Matthew.

Mark 1: 29–31

And as soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve them.

Matt. 8: 14–15

When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him.

For a further example, Mark 5: 1–20 should be compared with the very much shorter account in Matt. 8: 28–34. A synopsis is very useful for detailed comparisons: it sets out gospels in parallel columns so that they can be viewed at the same time (see the Bibliography).

The evidence is very impressive, but not absolutely decisive. There might just have been special reasons why Mark should want to abbreviate

Matthew and Luke in ways which seem to us to be distinctly odd, and yet at the same time add material which seems to us to be redundant.

(ii) Arguments based on the order of the material in Matthew, Mark, and Luke have been especially prominent in discussion of the synoptic problem. Lachmann noted that Luke very rarely changes Mark's order, and that Matthew does so only about seven times. While it is not difficult to account for the changes in order made by Matthew and Luke to Mark, it is very much more difficult to explain Mark's methods if he has used either Matthew, or Luke, or both.

In the past some scholars have developed a second argument from the order of the gospels. They have noted that Matthew and Luke never agree in order against Mark: they seem to have made occasional changes to Mark's order quite independently. But it is now generally accepted that while this observation does support Marcan priority strongly, it can also be used to support rival hypotheses.

(iii) Matthew and Luke frequently modify or omit redundant phrases or unusual words found in Mark, and improve his rather unsophisticated literary style. Mark begins a high proportion of his sentences with 'and'; he often links clauses within the same sentence with 'and'. Both Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, frequently 'improve' his rather unsophisticated Greek style.

Two specific examples are instructive. At Mark 1: 32 we read, 'When evening had come and when the sun had set . . .'. Of course the sun always sets when evening comes—and vice versa! Both Matthew and Luke have noted that one or the other of these clauses is redundant: Matthew includes only the first, Luke the second. Neither Matthew nor Luke includes Mark's rather curious reference to the cushion on which Jesus was asleep in the boat during the sudden storm on the lake (4: 38).

So many examples of the alleged later improvement of Mark's style have been noted that some scholars have claimed that this line of argument offers 'decisive' support for Marcan priority. Once again there is very strong cumulative evidence, but it falls short of proof. Some modern editors have occasionally been known to spoil the nicely turned prose of an accomplished writer by adding clumsy or redundant phrases!

(iv) A number of Marcan passages which seem to place Jesus in a bad light have been modified by Matthew and Luke. For example, Mark 3: 21 notes that some people were saying that Jesus 'was out of his mind'.

Neither Matthew nor Luke includes this strongly critical comment. Mark 6: 35 suggests that Jesus was unable to heal more than a few sick people 'in his own country'. Matthew carefully explains that this was the result of their unbelief, not the powerlessness of Jesus. In Mark 4: 38 the disciples say, 'Teacher, do you not care if we perish?' Both Matthew and Luke omit 'do you not care?', thus removing any suggestion that Jesus was indifferent to their plight. There is so much similar evidence that the most plausible hypothesis seems to be that the first gospel to be written has been 'tidied' by the two later gospels.

But once again an alternative explanation can be offered, though it has convinced few. Mark may have used Matthew and Luke and introduced changes which seem to us either to be awkward or to place Jesus in a bad light. Such changes may possibly have arisen simply as a result of Mark's personal preference.

(v) While the arguments given above (and more could be added) have persuaded most scholars that Mark is the earliest gospel, they do not amount to clear-cut proof. In recent decades some dissenters have noted (quite correctly) that Marcan priority is not the only possible explanation of some of the phenomena noted above. A rival hypothesis, which was first set out in 1789 by J. J. Griesbach, has been defended vigorously by a small number of scholars. On this view Mark is not the earliest but the *last* of the synoptic gospels to have been written, for Mark has used both Matthew and Luke. The modern version of Griesbach's hypothesis is often called the 'two gospel' hypothesis, in order to contrast it with the generally accepted view that Matthew and Luke have used 'two sources', Mark and a collection of the sayings of Jesus called Q (discussed below).

A full discussion of the 'two gospel' hypothesis cannot be included here, but it is worth noting the most damaging criticism that can be levelled against it. If an early Christian writer knew both Matthew and Luke, it is difficult to see why he would ever want to write what eventually became Mark's gospel. Who would want to produce a much-truncated version of Matthew and Luke? Why was Mark unwilling to include either Matthew's Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7 or the shorter version in Luke 6: 17-49?

When particular passages are examined carefully on the basis of this alternative to Marcan priority, it is not at all easy to understand Mark's literary methods. But as we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, on the basis of

Marcan priority we can readily understand why Matthew and Luke should want to modify and expand Mark, and the methods and distinctive theological emphases of Matthew and Luke can be discerned with some confidence. In short, one of the strongest arguments which can be used to support the hypothesis of Marcan priority is that it has proved to be more plausible and more serviceable than any of its rivals.

By now it should be clear why study of the interrelationships of the synoptic gospels has been pursued so vigorously for so long. Marcan priority and the 'two gospel' (or Griesbach) hypothesis lead to utterly different understandings of the evangelists' methods and emphases and of the setting of their gospels in early Christianity. Is Mark our earliest gospel, the foundation on which both Matthew and Luke have built their gospels? Or is Mark but a pale shadow of the two gospels he has abbreviated?

The Q hypothesis

Luke shares with Matthew about 230 verses which are not found in Mark. For over a century this material has been known as Q. We must consider briefly at this point the five main arguments which have been advanced in support of the view that both Matthew and Luke have used Q as well as Mark.

(i) There is often very close verbal agreement between Matthew and Luke, extending over several verses. As examples, the following passages should be compared carefully: Matt. 3: 7–10 = Luke 3: 7–9; Matt. 11: 4–11, 16–19 = Luke 7: 22–8, 31–5. Even though Matthew and Luke are two very different gospels, they have both used Mark extensively. Thus it is likely (so the argument runs) that where they agree closely in non-Markan sections, they are both using the same source, Q.

Verbal agreement between Matthew and Luke is often close—but not in every tradition the later gospels seem to share. Compare, for example, Matt. 7: 13–14, 22–3 and Luke 13: 24–7; and also Matt 22: 1–10 and Luke 14: 16–24. These passages (and many others with similar limited verbal agreement) are usually said to stem from Q.

Why is there close verbal agreement in some so-called Q passages, but not in others? This baffling phenomenon is often glossed over by supporters of Q. The explanations which are offered often look like special pleading. So the close verbal agreement between Matthew and Luke in some passages by no means proves that Q existed.

(ii) Although Matthew weaves his sources together (especially in his five large discourses) and Luke places them in 'strips' or blocks, there are some striking agreements in the *order* in which the non-Marcian traditions are found in Matthew and Luke. These agreements in order cannot be coincidental and strongly suggest the use of a common source.

(iii) In several passages in Matthew and Luke we find that essentially the same tradition is repeated; these repetitions are known as doublets. These occur where Matthew and Luke both use the Marcan form of a saying, but elsewhere they also both use a non-Marcian or Q form of essentially the same saying. As an example the following doublet should be examined in a synopsis: 'To those who have, more will be given . . .': Mark 4: 25 = Matt. 13: 12 = Luke 8: 18; a similar saying is found at Matt. 25: 29 = Luke 19: 26. And as a second example of a doublet: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves . . .': Mark 8: 34 f. = Matt. 16: 24 f. = Luke 9: 23 f.; there is a similar saying at Matt. 10: 38 f. = Luke 14: 27, 17: 33.

(iv) The Q material 'hangs together' as an entity: the traditions betray a similar theological outlook. Q did not survive beyond its incorporation into Matthew and Luke, but the Gospel of Thomas does consist of a collection of sayings of Jesus, and this suggests that other collections of the sayings of Jesus may have been made. (See below pp. 123–30.)

(v) Any alternative explanation of the non-Marcian material shared by Matthew and Luke is much less plausible, especially the suggestion that Luke has used Matthew, the main rival hypothesis to Q which we must now consider briefly.

If Luke has used Matthew, then we may dispense with Q. Since the Griesbach (or 'two gospel') alternative to Marcan priority (see above pp. 20–3) also insists that Luke has used Matthew, this possibility has to be considered seriously in discussions of the synoptic problem. If Luke has used Matthew, then he has used this major source extremely freely indeed: he has 'dismantled' Matthew in order to write his own very different gospel. So we must ask whether it is at all likely that Luke has used Matthew (as well as Mark) as a major source.

For the following reasons this alternative to the Q hypothesis is most unlikely and has attracted few supporters. (a) If Luke has used Matthew, what has happened to Matthew's five impressive discourses? On this view, a small part of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7 reappears in Luke 6: 20–49, but the rest of the material is either scattered (apparently

haphazardly) right through Luke's gospel and set in very different contexts or it is omitted completely. Matthew's second discourse in chapter 10 reappears in no fewer than seven different chapters in Luke! While attempts have been made to account for Luke's rather odd treatment of the Matthean discourses, they have convinced few.

(b) If Luke has used Matthew, we would expect him to have adopted some of the expansions and modifications Matthew makes to Mark. But hardly a trace of them can be found in Luke. On this alternative to the Q hypothesis, where Matthew and Mark have the same tradition, Luke opts for Mark's version and ignores Matthew's; and at the same time he rearranges Matthew very considerably. Why did Luke find Matthew so unattractive, when in almost all other parts of early Christianity it became the favourite gospel? Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi provides a good example. At Luke 9: 18–21, Mark's account (8: 27–30) has been used, but there isn't a sign in Luke of the major addition Matthew makes to Mark at 16: 16–19. Here several sayings of Jesus addressed to Peter, including the words 'On this rock I will build my church', have not been used.

(c) This alternative to the Q hypothesis has to assume that in the non-Markan traditions Matthew and Luke share, it is always Luke who has changed the earlier form of the tradition found in Matthew. This claim cannot be sustained when the traditions are examined in detail. On the view that Luke has used Matthew, Luke has *abbreviated* Matthew's version both of the Lord's Prayer (see above pp. 6–11) and of the Beatitudes (see below pp. 67–70). Why should Luke wish to do this? It is difficult to discover reasons.

(d) After the temptations of Jesus (Matt. 4: 1–11 = Luke 4: 1–13), Luke and Matthew never use the non-Markan sayings they share (i.e. Q) in the same Marcan context. If Luke has used Matthew, then he has carefully removed every non-Markan (Q) saying from the Marcan context it has in Matthew and placed it in a different context!

(e) We may mention one final point which in fact sums up several of the above observations. If we accept that Luke has used Mark, then with the help of a synopsis we can readily discover the changes of various kinds which he has made to Mark. On the whole he has retained Mark's order and has considerable respect for the content, especially of the teaching of Jesus. If Luke has also used Matthew, we would expect him to have

modified his second source in broadly similar ways. But this is by no means the case.

Most scholars accept that on the whole Luke has retained the order and content of Q more fully than Matthew, so reconstructions of Q are usually based on Luke. Q was probably originally a little larger than the 230 or so verses shared by Matthew and Luke. Since both Matthew and Luke omit some Marcan material, why should we suppose that they have both incorporated Q in full? Hence some of the 'M' or 'L' material (i.e. traditions found only in Matthew and Luke) may have belonged originally to Q, though the precise extent of such additional Q traditions is far from clear.

Before we proceed, we must note that supporters of Marcan priority and of the Q hypothesis do have to contend with evidence which seems to some to undermine these two pillars of most modern study of the gospels. If we accept Marcan priority, why do we find that in a number of passages where Matthew and Luke are apparently using Mark independently, the two later evangelists *agree* in their phraseology? These unexpected agreements are usually dubbed 'the minor agreements'. But are they minor? Or are there so many of them that they are the Achilles heel of the two-source hypothesis? The 'minor agreements' are almost always the starting point for rival explanations.

The phrase 'who struck you?' which Matt 26: 68 and Luke 22: 64 add to Mark 14: 65 is a good example of a 'minor agreement'. Is it simply a coincidence that both later evangelists expand Mark in precisely the same way? Do they both draw on continuing oral tradition? Or is it possible that Matthew and Luke used a version of Mark which included this phrase? In fact some (mainly later) manuscripts of Mark do include the phrase! Most scholars accept that in nearly every case explanations along the various lines just mentioned can be offered.

There are, then, strong reasons for accepting the two-document hypothesis, i.e. for supposing that Matthew and Luke have used both Mark and Q. Alternative hypotheses are much less plausible, but there are two main reasons why the two-document hypothesis does not amount to mathematical proof of the synoptic problem. The phenomena of the 'minor agreements' and the considerable variations in the extent of verbal agreement in so-called Q passages remind us that certainty eludes us. Marcan priority and Q are working hypotheses and on this basis impressive results have been achieved in modern study of the gospels. The later

chapters of this book assume that these two hypotheses are the most plausible available.

The gospels as proclamation: form criticism

In the first three decades of the twentieth century the gospels came to be seen not as biographies, but as profoundly theological writings. They were said to be so strongly stamped with the Easter faith of the early church that their value for the student of the life and teaching of Jesus was strictly limited. The gospels were anything but straightforward historical accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

This complete change of direction was closely related to the development of a fresh way of analysing the traditions behind the gospels. Scholars noted that Mark was largely made up of short accounts of the actions and teaching of Jesus. These pericopae (or paragraphs) fell into set patterns or forms, hence the term 'form criticism'. Since Mark's pericopae were only loosely linked to one another, if at all, the early form critics concluded that they represented originally independent oral traditions. The evangelist, who was seen very much as an anthologist, was responsible for gathering them together.

If one reads the opening chapters of Mark it is not difficult to see that it is rather like a block of chocolate: it can be broken apart quite easily into separate small blocks. Mark 1: 40–5, the account of the healing of the leper, is fairly typical. There is no explicit geographical or chronological setting: this story could be positioned without difficulty at many other points in the gospel. So it is quite possible that its present position has been determined by Mark himself, rather than by genuine historical reminiscence.

The form critics claimed that the traditions behind the gospels could be analysed according to their structure. Some pericopae which reach their climax with words of Jesus were called 'pronouncement stories'. For example, in Mark 2: 17 Jesus replies to his critics who were outraged at his conduct in eating with tax collectors and sinners: 'I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners.' This comment concludes the dispute: there is nothing more to be said. There are some fourteen 'pronouncement stories' in Mark; see, for example, Mark 2: 23–8; 10: 2–9; 10: 17–22; 12: 13–17.

Other traditions focus not on a word of Jesus, but on his miraculous action. They end with a comment on the response to a miracle of Jesus; see, for example, Mark 1: 28; 1: 31; 1: 45. The sayings as well as the accounts of the actions of Jesus were closely analysed according to their 'form'. The parables, for example, are clearly a special group of sayings. The sayings of Jesus were analysed into several other more technical categories.

Some form critics claimed that close study of the 'forms' of both the narratives and the sayings of Jesus shed light on their origin and development in the early church. For three decades the traditions on which Mark drew had been used and shaped (and sometimes even created) in the life of the early Christian communities. On this view, the gate and path from Mark's gospel to a reconstruction of the life of Jesus was not as wide and easy as had been supposed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, several scholars insisted that analysis of the gospel traditions according to their forms does not necessarily solve the question of their historicity. We shall return to this much-disputed area in Chapter 9.

The various types (or 'forms') of traditions were often related by scholars to the diverse needs of the early church—to missionary preaching, to catechetical instruction, to debate with opponents, or to worship. There are, however, difficulties with this suggestion. We do not know as much as we would like about the earliest Christian communities which transmitted the gospel traditions. So reconstruction of the kind of traditions they needed must be tentative. And some of the 'forms' sketched above seem appropriate for more than one setting in the life of the church.

A more general point made by the early form critics does seem valid: the first followers of Jesus only retained traditions which were relevant to their life and faith. It is for this reason that the gospels fail to satisfy modern curiosity concerning the physical appearance or psychological make-up of Jesus. Some form critics, however, went a good deal further. They claimed that historical and biographical reminiscence was of no interest at all in the early church. Jesus was worshipped as 'Lord' and his *parousia* (coming) or return was expected soon. He was not a 'hero' whose actions and attitudes were to be imitated.

Many form critics appealed to the words of Martin Kähler written in 1896: 'Just as the light of the sun is reflected in every drop of the bedewed meadow, so the full person of the Lord of the church's proclamation meets

the reader of the gospels in each little story.' In other words, every single pericope is itself 'gospel' or proclamation.

This understanding of the traditions behind the gospels was also applied to the gospels themselves. They were not intended to be biographies. They are 'gospels' which proclaim the Christ of the faith of the post-Easter church. They continually disclose to the perceptive reader, often partially and indirectly, not so much who Jesus of Nazareth was in his earthly life, but who the Risen Lord is now. In the words of Martin Dibelius written in 1919, Mark is 'a book of the secret epiphanies of Jesus'.

Not all the claims of the early form critics have stood the test of time. Their fundamental insight that the traditions behind the gospels reflect, at least in part, the theological convictions of the post-Easter period is both undeniable and valuable. But there is no need to insist that the early church was not interested in setting out the 'past' of the life of Jesus. As we saw in our opening chapter (pp. 4–6), the gospels are concerned both with the story of Jesus, and with his significance for his later followers.

The evangelists as authors: redaction criticism

In the preceding paragraphs we noted that the form critics saw Mark as an anthology or as a collage—a collection of various shapes and sizes of originally independent pieces. With few exceptions, little attention was paid to the contribution of Mark or of the other evangelists. But as with a collage, the gospels are undoubtedly more than merely the sum of their individual parts. Have the evangelists themselves reshaped some of the traditions at their disposal—or even contributed some pieces? What are the distinctive features of the individual gospels? With hindsight, these questions were bound to be raised in the wake of form criticism. In fact they have dominated study of the gospels for the last forty years.

This general approach is known as 'redaction criticism'. In the first phase of redaction criticism, close attention was given to the modifications made by the evangelists to their sources; the 'redaction', it is usually alleged, is consistent and reveals the evangelist's own theological stance and his particular purpose in writing. Little or no attention was given to traditions the evangelists retained without modification.

In the second phase of redaction critical study, which is sometimes referred to as 'composition criticism', the evangelists' use of *all* the traditions at their disposal (both 'redacted' and 'unredacted' traditions) was studied. 'Composition criticism' considers the overall structure of each gospel, the structure of individual sections and sub-sections, and the order in which the evangelists have placed the traditions at their disposal. Once again conclusions about the evangelists' intentions are drawn from study of their literary methods.

If we can be reasonably certain that Matthew and Luke have both used Mark, it is not difficult with the use of a synopsis to trace the changes or additions the later evangelists have made to Mark's traditions. Some of the changes are no more than a tidying of some of Mark's awkward phrases and constructions. But again and again modifications reflect a different theological point of view.

In 1948 G. Bornkamm published what has become a classic study of Matthew's reinterpretation of Mark's account of the stilling of the storm. This lucid short essay, which is listed in the Bibliography, still repays careful study. Mark's account in 4: 35–41 begins a series of miracle stories which are geographically grouped around the sea of Galilee. The scene is set at 4: 1 where Jesus teaches the large crowd on the shore from a boat on the sea. The long 'parables discourse' follows (4: 2–34). Jesus and the disciples then leave the crowds and cross to the other side of the sea of Galilee. Mark's account of the stilling of the storm is a miracle story. It ends with a reference to the awe of the disciples: 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

The setting in Matt. 8: 23–7 is quite different. Matthew's version forms part of a cycle of miracle stories in chapters 8 and 9; they have been carefully set immediately after chapters 5–7, the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew has introduced and concluded this major section of his gospel with similar sentences (4: 23 and 9: 35), thus confirming that these chapters form one long single section.

The immediate context in Matthew is striking. Matthew's account of the stilling of the storm is preceded by two short incidents about following Jesus in discipleship (8: 19–22). In Mark the disciples take Jesus with them in the boat (4: 36), but in Matthew we read: 'And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him' (8: 23). The verb 'followed' links this pericope with the preceding verses. According to Bornkamm the preceding

sayings about discipleship serve to illustrate the meaning of what takes place in the stilling of the storm.

Bornkamm observes that Matthew has made a number of other changes. In particular he notes that whereas in Mark the disciples refer to Jesus as 'Teacher' (4: 38), in Matthew Jesus is called 'Lord', a change the evangelist has made in numerous other places. 'Lord' is not a human title of respect (as is 'Teacher'), but a 'divine predicate of majesty'. Bornkamm concludes: 'Matthew is not only a hander-on of the narrative, but also its oldest exegete, and in fact the first to interpret the journey of the disciples with Jesus in the storm and the stilling of the storm with reference to discipleship, and that means with reference to the little ship of the Church' (p. 55).

This is a good example of redaction criticism. Attention is drawn to the structure of Matthew's gospel and to the new context in which the evangelist has placed the Marcan miracle story ('composition criticism'). Matthew's 'redaction' of Mark often appears at first to involve incidental details, but close study reveals that it is part of a consistent and thorough-going reinterpretation of Mark.

In this essay Bornkamm noted that in future it would be necessary to inquire about the motives in the composition of the individual gospels. Over the past half-century many scholars have taken up that challenge. But they have not always heeded Bornkamm's further warning: 'Care will have to be taken to guard against reading out of the text or into it more than is warranted' (p. 57). All too often theological reinterpretation has been discerned in what are simply stylistic preferences.

If Matthew and Luke have clearly reshaped and reinterpreted their traditions, we must surely expect Mark to have done likewise. But in the case of Mark, it is very much less easy to distinguish between the traditions on which the evangelist drew and the changes (or redaction) for which he was responsible. Careful attention to the evangelist's methods of composition does not always take us much further. Redaction criticism of Mark will always be more hazardous than in the case of Matthew and Luke. The problem will be considered further in the next chapter.

Redaction criticism has directed attention to the distinctive features of the individual gospels. In a sense this book is a product of redaction criticism: we have emphasized that study of the gospels must start with the teaching of the evangelists; only then is it possible to consider the teaching

of Jesus. Forty or fifty years ago a book on the gospels would have concentrated solely on the teaching and intention of Jesus. Redaction critical study of the gospels has led to a new appreciation of their purposes. There have been many gains—some of which will be considered in the next three chapters.

The gospels as stories: literary criticism

In the last two decades or so a wide range of insights drawn from the work of literary critics has been applied to the gospels. An appreciation of the importance of literary genre for interpretation (discussed at the beginning of this chapter) is one such literary insight. Two further types of literary criticism will be considered in this section: narrative criticism and reader response criticism.

Narrative criticism of the gospels began with the publication in 1982 of *Mark as Story*, written jointly by a New Testament scholar, David Rhoads, and a colleague based in an English department, Donald Michie. The title signals its main thrust. The gospels are seen as narratives with a carefully constructed plot and with finely drawn characterization of individuals and groups. The evangelist (or narrator) invites the reader to enter a 'story world' which is full of conflict, suspense, and unexpected reversal. The reader is encouraged to sympathize with some of the characters, but not others. Terms which dot the pages of books on modern English literature suddenly appear in a study of Mark's gospel.

A year later Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* adopted a similar approach. Plot and characterization are considered, as well as the gospel's use of symbolism, irony, and the misunderstanding motif. Narrative critical studies of Matthew and of Luke soon followed; details are included in the Bibliography.

Narrative criticism deliberately turns its back on attempts to separate tradition and redaction. The gospels are not seen as 'windows' through which the reader (after careful historical reconstruction) might be able to 'see' the teaching of Jesus or the make-up of the community for whom the evangelist is writing. The text of the gospels is a 'mirror' in which readers 'see' the world in which they themselves live. The narrators are seeking to persuade the reader that the story they tell and its central character

reveal something profoundly true about the 'real' world in which the reader lives.

A narrator often reveals to the reader the full significance of what is happening in the story. Mark contains a number of asides addressed directly to the reader. These often take the form of explanations. In chapter 7, for example, Jewish hand-washing customs are explained (vv. 3–4), and the Hebrew word *Corban* (v. 11) and the Aramaic word *Ephphatha* (v. 34) are translated for Mark's Greek-speaking readers. In verse 19 the evangelist himself comments directly on the preceding words of Jesus in order to make sure that the reader has grasped what Mark took to be Jesus' radical rejection of Jewish ideas about clean and unclean food: 'Thus he declared all foods clean.'

Matthew frequently introduces quotations which stress that in particular incidents the Old Testament has been fulfilled. In Matt. 8: 16 there is a general reference to the healing activity of Jesus which has been taken from Mark 1: 32–4. The verse which follows is not found in Mark. It may be seen as an 'aside' of the narrator which sets out for the reader the significance of what is taking place in the story: 'This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."' (On Matthew's 'fulfilment citations', see further below, pp. 70–3.)

Even more important than the evangelists' asides and explanations to their readers are the ways they disclose to the reader at the very outset of their stories the true identity of the main character. Mark does this in his opening line: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' As the story unfolds the true identity of Jesus is either kept secret from the participants in the story or is misunderstood by them, but for the reader there is no secret.

In Matthew 1 and 2 and also in Luke 1 and 2, which are usually known as the infancy narratives, the true identity of Jesus is repeatedly made clear before the story proper unfolds. The important prologue to the Fourth Gospel, John 1: 1–18, functions in the same way. The evangelists use the simple literary technique of 'foreshadowing' at the outset of their stories' themes which will be developed as the 'plot' unfolds.

At first sight this approach seems to mark a sharp break with earlier scholarship, but there are some lines of continuity. In some respects narrative criticism is an extension of 'composition criticism' with its strong

insistence that the gospels must be viewed as whole units whose various parts are interrelated.

To some scholars it seems inappropriate to apply to ancient writings methods developed in study of sophisticated modern novels. While redaction criticism has taught us that the gospels are not 'artless', they are a far cry from the novels of James Joyce or Thomas Mann. As we saw above, some of the techniques and conventions of modern biographical writing were unknown to ancient biographers. Some of the methods used by modern novelists were unknown to ancient storytellers, so caution is necessary.

However, some of the devices of the storyteller which are universal undoubtedly do help us to read the gospels more sensitively. A good story will contain a memorable beginning and ending, a strong plot with climactic moments, dramatic scenes, and vividly drawn characters. All are present in the gospels, as we shall see in the chapters which follow.

Narrative criticism has made a major impact on study of the gospels. The traditional concerns of biblical scholars with historical reconstruction are being complemented by literary criticism. Consideration of the ways the narratives of the gospels make their impact on the reader and force a response increase still further our appreciation of the evangelists' skills. However, it is important to note that since the 'story world' of the evangelists is not a timeless world, but one set in a particular first-century religious and cultural setting, historical studies are still essential.

There is a further ground for hesitation. Narrative criticism takes seriously (and helpfully) the 'story' element of the gospels. But the gospels are more than 'stories'! Hence the phrase 'story and significance' is used repeatedly in this book in order to draw attention to their dual perspective. The evangelists inform us about the 'past' story of Jesus of Nazareth, and also about his continuing significance as Messiah—Christ and Son of God.

But how do we as readers of the gospels respond? The 'story' and the 'significance' of the text are, and always have been, construed differently by different readers. The evangelists do not always tell us all we want to know, so as readers we are forced fill the gaps in the texts. We may not be disposed to accept what they do tell us. Inevitably we respond on the basis of our own presuppositions.

The points just made take us to the heart of what is known as 'reader response criticism'. The focus of attention is no longer the author or evangelist, or even the text itself, but the reader and her or his responses to

the text. Once again the work of literary critics, especially Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, has been influential in raising fresh questions for the serious student of the gospels.

Reader response critics have given most of their attention to the responses of modern readers. They insist that meaning is constructed by the reader who receives the text. However, as we saw in our discussion of the gospels as biographies, ancient and modern literary conventions often differ, and if they are ignored confusion results. So we need to bear in mind that ancient and modern responses to the text may differ. The responses of the first readers of the gospels need to be taken seriously. How did they 'hear' the texts? What assumptions about miracles, for example, would have been in their minds?

Two further points need to be mentioned. The gospels were intended for *oral performance*, not silent personal study. Silent reading of texts was almost unknown in antiquity. The gospels would have been read aloud repeatedly. Hence many of the stylistic techniques used by the evangelists (repetition of words and phrases, for example) were intended to assist *oral* communication of the text.

The first listeners may have taken for granted some of the features of the gospels which make little impact on us. So consideration of the assumptions the first readers would have brought to the text is always important. The first listeners to Matthew's gospel would have been familiar with the technique of comparison, for it was a feature of education at all levels. Comparisons were regularly made between persons who were similar, but different. As we shall see in Chapter 4, Matthew draws a sustained set of comparisons between Jesus and Moses, between Jesus and John the Baptist, between Jesus and the disciples, and between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees.

In emphasizing the importance of the responses of the first listeners to the gospels, I do not intend to imply that the responses of modern readers are unimportant. We all bring our presuppositions and prejudices to the text. Reader response critics remind us that these assumptions play a much larger role in interpretation than we imagine.

Study of the gospels has undoubtedly been enlivened by the new perspectives and questions brought to their interpretation in recent decades. Feminist writers and liberation theologians, for example, have brought fresh readings and a range of stimulating issues to the fore.

In the interpretation of the gospels the intention of the evangelists must be taken seriously, as must the design and narrative contours of the text itself, and the responses of readers—whether ancient or modern. Author, text, and reader all have their place; a one-sided concentration on any one of the three leads to mayhem in interpretation. (For a fuller introduction to literary criticism and to the principles of interpretation, see Robert Morgan's book *Biblical Interpretation* in this series.)

In this chapter we have examined the approaches to the gospels which have dominated modern study. We have seen how the pendulum of scholarly opinion has swung from a one-sided view of the gospels as biographies to the equally lopsided view of some form critics who saw the gospels (correctly) as concerned with proclamation, but denied that the traditions were concerned with the 'past' of Jesus. The evangelists, we have insisted, have two concerns: to tell the story of Jesus (as they understand it) and to spell out their convictions concerning the continuing significance of Jesus after Easter. 'Story' and 'significance' are intertwined and sometimes tangled. In Part II we shall consider ways of 'unravelling' the gospels in order to reconstruct the teaching and intention of Jesus.