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Textual criticism and the historical study of the gospels

The textual critic, throughout the period in which I have been practising that craft, has found himself one whose studies, deemed by him essential to the work of historical and exegetical study, have in fact set him apart from his fellow scholars. They regard him with something between awe and despite. There are many reasons why this has come about, not least that the equipment for textual criticism is very large and does not overlap at every point with the equipment for these other tasks. If we pass in review the work of those who are known to be textual critics of scripture, we shall find, I think, that when their work does not fall into that category, it tends to be either in the patristic field, or in the philology of the various languages and literatures of the Christian east or west.

Nevertheless, the textual critic has taken up his task as a contribution to the ongoing study of scripture, and he often practises as a teacher of general New Testament studies. His interests there may be in any of the departments into which New Testament study falls. In my own case, I am particularly interested in the historical questions raised by the gospel materials, and this paper, originally composed and given nine years ago to a small graduate seminar at Birmingham, seeks to investigate what are the links between the two disciplines, and whether that which is my main interest contributes in any major way to the other.

The only scholar who readily comes to mind as practising both and linking them is that non pareil Francis Crawford Burkitt. Kirsopp Lake was interested in the history of the early church, and some German scholars such as Juelicher did important work on both text and gospel criticism: but neither of these linked the two disciplines as Burkitt did. Other scholars, such as Burkitt's successor Dodd, were clearly competent in textual studies, but their contributions are limited to obiter scripta in footnotes and excursus. Most scholars tend to leave lower criticism to others. While I have to confess that textual

criticism of the New Testament has led me in several fields which the higher critic and exegete does not need to walk in, I believe that there should be more interest in textual studies by them than I have generally found to be the case, and I hope to indicate some areas where the study of the gospel history and the study of the text of the gospels do converge.

There are many preliminary questions where historical study expects an answer and a foundation for further work from textual study. In certain cases the transmission of material is illuminated by textual data. The clearest instances are those of the ending of Mark and the pericope adulterae in the Johannine and Lukan traditions. In spite of a recent plagiarism of Burgon, textual study clearly shows that the authentic words of the evangelist Mark as we have received them end at vs 8 of chapter 16. It is interesting that in interpreting this datum scholars tend to divide themselves according to their total attitude to the historical value of Mark. If Mark has high historical value for a particular scholar, he will generally conclude that the ending is due to accident, while if he perceives a more theological or symbolic scheme dominating the gospel, he is likely to treat ephobounto gar as the intentionally striking ending by the evangelist. Where the pericope adulterae is transmitted, it has a far higher incidence of variant readings than is normal: this seems to underline what we can also determine on other grounds, that we are dealing with a floating tradition, transmitted orally. More might be made of these data for our understanding of transmission by word of mouth within the community.

As the work of Streeter showed there are a number of places where the literary criticism of the gospels is inextricably bound up with their textual criticism. I am thinking particularly of the elucidation of the relation of the synoptic gospels. There are a number of cases such as that of orgistheis at Mk 1.40⁴¹ where the establishment of the lectio difficilior on text-critical grounds is confirmed by the observation that the offending phrase finds no equivalence at all in the other gospels.

Another interesting case is at the end of the passion prediction Mk 8.31, 32, neglected even by the textual critics to judge from recent hand apparatus. It is discussed by Burkitt in the second volume of the Journal of Theological Studies, and reference is also made to it in the first volume of the Cambridge History of the Bible on pg. 340. This latter variant is not only of interest in the context of synoptic criticism but might bear on matters of history and exegesis. However, it is characteristic of the present tendency that M.D. Goulder for instance should reject textual criticism as an ancillary to synoptic criticism when it militates against the notion that Luke is independent of Matthew, while indulging in textual speculation without demonstration to support his own Redaktionskritik.

The sources of the evangelists too can sometimes leave traces in textual variation. For instance, readings in Mk 6.20 and 22 may indicate an Aramaic base to the whole tradition - a case which if established might have interesting historical implications. This is very complex however, and shows how various disciplines must combine to elucidate source criticism. Side by side with these Aporien which seem to demand a Semitic explanation, are usages about whose essentially Greek character there is no room for doubt.

These are general observations with illustrative detail. There are also a large number of specific exegetical points where textual problems may have a bearing. Several bear on matters of place and time. Particularly striking is the case of Mk 7.31 which has been taken for instance as proof of Mark's ignorance of Palestine, or as by Wellhausen as a mistranscription of some other expression (in that case, "to Bessaida"). Burkitt however makes use of this in such a way as to make it into a locus classicus for the trustworthiness of the Marcan outline: Jesus makes so wide and unlikely a detour specifically to avoid the territories of Herod Antipas who has seen him as John the Baptist redivivus. Burkitt also linked this point with the peculiarly Marcan form of Jesus' saying on divorce (10.12) which is omitted by the other evangelist.

Older criticism had seen it as reflecting Roman law and to have intruded from a Gentile milieu: Burkitt saw it as an outright reference to the adulterous relationship of Herod and Herodias. He further drew attention to the variant of the Sinaitic Syriac, supported in his day by the minuscule 1, which reverses the order of the declaration to give the offence of the deserting woman in first place: we now know of the additional evidence of the related ms. 209, which omits the "male" clause by homoioteleuton, the Freer codex (W), and the idiosyncratic Adis^v ms. of the Old Georgian. "This₃ he suggested, is probably the true order". In such ways he linked textual and other exegetical matters with the overall criticism of the gospel tradition. C. Campbell 1994

In the Johannine tradition there are a number of points where the evangelist seems at pains to establish the time of the sign of Jesus to which he is about to make reference, or to lay emphasis upon surrounding circumstances. In one of these there is specific textual variation about the date (5.1) and in others variation or other difficulty which suggest redactional stratifications. These problems do not yet appear to have been satisfactorily dealt with.

It may also be noted that in two places connected with the birth of Jesus variants are to be found which militate against the traditions of a miraculous conception. These are firstly, the reading at Matt. 1.18 ¹⁶ of the Sinaitic Syriac, to which Dionysius bar Salibi bears witness, and which is indirectly supported by evidence in the Ferrar mss. and the anti-Judaic dialogue of Timothy and Aquila, and secondly the reading of the Old Latin b at Lk. 1.34 and 38, to which ms. e also gives indirect support.

It has been noted that historical events were not of primary concern to the evangelists and those from whom they derived their traditions. The textual data seems to point to the fact that uncertainty and variant traditions were still current even after the writing down of the gospels.

The sayings of Jesus are equally an historical datum and to ascertain them, although primarily a philological activity, contributes ultimately to our picture of Jesus and our assessment of the historical veracity of later theologoumena about him. Perhaps the most striking case in which textual data directly impinges upon our picture of Jesus' own self-understanding, is that of the so-called Cry of Jubilation (Mt.11.25-27/ Lk.10.21f). Differences in order suggest a primitive disarrangement, and a conjectural reconstruction of this by Harnack gives a saying in line with Synoptic witness to Jesus' knowledge of the Father, rather the Johannine tone of the pericope in the majority text. Other variants in the opening words of the saying support this.

In this connection we are led into the difficult field of the Aramaic origin of the gospel tradition. Matthew Black has laid some stress upon the variant reading attested by Irenaeus from Marcosian sources where the interjection oua supplants nai of the canonical text. This, he claims, following Harvey and Merx, is the Aramaic cry of joy. However, the word is also attested as a Hellenistic Greek interjection, where it expresses wonder or amazement, a sentiment which would be equally appropriate to the thought of this passage. We may therefore doubt the admittedly attractive idea (to which I myself have hitherto attached much credence) of this reading ^{that} being derived from a parallel source to the Synoptics, preserved in Gnostic circles and going back ultimately to Aramaic.

Such a notion is perhaps viable in the case of the sayings tradition of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, but it is notorious that the experts in the disciplines which must be laid under contribution to substantiate this are divided on the issue. It seems to be common ground that a Syriac base is the lowest stratum, but direct translation into Coptic and indirect via Greek have both their advocates. Schrage argued, very cogently to my mind, that the canonical tradition in Coptic had contributed to the language of the Coptic known to us, and thus antedates it: but this too has been disputed.

Yet more controversial is the argument of Gilles Quispel who has sought to link this Gnostic source with the Western text, the Diatessaron or Harmony traditions east and west, and with variant forms of gospel sayings in the pseudo-~~E~~lementines and elsewhere.

Black laid much stress on various expansions and idiosyncracies of the Syriac tradition, especially the Old Syriac. In a number of cases discussed by him he is willing to find extra-canonical material from the sayings of Jesus, which surviving in the Aramaic speaking area has been taken into the written gospel tradition (perhaps through the Diatessaron) in Syriac. Linked to this is the linguistic datum of West Aramaic forms in the Old Syriac version. It seems to me that the time is ripe for a reexamination of the material adduced by Black, and a fresh perusal of the whole field, which can now include the Syriac original of Ephraem's commentary on the concordant gospel, and our growing knowledge of Afrahat, amongst other important sources not yet laid under contribution. Certainly, Black's work like all such useful critical summaries of work in a particular field must not be allowed to become an oracle before which no other scholar may bark.

In sum we may say that much is at present unclear about the bearing of textual study on the transmission of the sayings of Jesus, and that further research will probably find a rich quarry there. What we do see supports on the whole the view that in their Greek form the tradition of the sayings of Jesus was more stable than that of the rare data of time and place: but that there may have been a parallel tradition in the Aramaic area.

What I have attempted to look at so far is the contribution that textual criticism may make to the understanding of the transmission of traditions as well as the more evident function of establishing the text upon which secure exegesis and historical understanding can be based. There is another aspect which we may briefly consider, namely whether the methodology of text criticism is applicable in the higher criticism also.

We have inherited certain rules of thumb of which two may here deserve our attention. Lectio brevior potior is one of these. It would seem to coincide with an assumption emphasised by form-critical research and elsewhere, namely that the tendency is to embellish stories with details, names, psychological explanations and the like, to expand parables, to link up originally separate sayings by catchwords, and so on. Two observations may be of value here, firstly that where we can demonstrate expansion in the text-critical field, it is usually to remove difficulty of understanding: secondly, that there are some clear cases where abbreviation has been resorted to for the same reason, or, as may well have been the case with Tatian, for stylistic or purely mechanical reasons. We might not then apply the form-critical principle so readily if we thought that the text-critical provides some analogy. The second adage (which in fact subsumes the other) is lectio difficilior potior. It might suggest that a position in historical criticism which occasions difficulty or scandal is to be preferred to one that smoothes problems away. But in textual criticism it is of course assumed that the reading which presents itself as the more difficult has in fact been very thoroughly scrutinized and is not based on faults of transmission, errors of translation, or even on the critic's misreading of the data before him. This makes incumbent upon the historian a sound grasp of the surrounding circumstances of the transmission of the data on which he bases his selection and his judgement. Just as the textual critic must be aware of all the factors in the transmission of his data, so the historian must have a workable and defensible understanding of the development of the church and its faith as the background to his understanding of the traditions of Jesus, and thus the precondition of his estimate of the history of Jesus himself. With historical criticism as with textual criticism, I submit, we have to work upstream, identifying the varied terrain through which the stream has flowed, and the contributory factors to its constitence.

Ultimately it is a sound eye for probability that we must pray to have and seek to cultivate. So we shall I think reject as implausible (as well as on textual and linguistic grounds) theories based on Eisler's handling of the Old Russian Josephus, but have to take seriously (even if we reject them eventually) reconstructions which take it as unlikely that Jesus had, as our forefathers used to put it, a Messianic self-consciousness, or a prior conception of his role in reconciliation and atonement. ^{the} One takes account of the basic facts even if it does not in our view give the best understanding of them: the other raises the notion of a secret history more remarkable and disreputable than anything Procopius revealed about the Byzantine court.

No doubt these guidelines are clear to the historian pure and simple: but I suggest that it is of interest to find them confirmed by the discipline of textual criticism.