EVANGELICAL IMPLICATIONS OF MATTHEAN PRIORITY

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Johann Griesbach (1745-1812) firmly supported the tradition of Matthean priority against the then innovative view of Marcan primacy. The similiarity of Mark to Matthew and Luke, his lack of an independent chronology, the obvious interdependence of Matthew and Luke, plus external evidence and logical historical development all seemed to declare both the dependent and subsequent nature of Mark as well as the priority of Matthew. Griesbach's hypothesis was soon discarded, however, in the frantic scramble to refute the mythologizing of David Friedrich Strauss. The blade nearest to hand was Marcan priority, by which it was hoped to discredit Strauss' source theory, the same Griesbach hypothesis, and thus parry the thrust of his argument.

Having achieved ascendancy the Marcan hypothesis, and subsequently the two-source theory, has reigned in NT scholarship for the past century. Inevitably this position has made itself known in the writings of evangelical authors. Robert Gundry, in his recent commentary on Matthew, presumes that "the comparison undertaken here will show that the peculiarities of Matthew derive almost wholly from his own revisions of and additions to Mark and the material shared only with Luke." Donald Guthrie projects a six-stage theory of origins in which Mark reduced the content of Peter's preaching to his action gospel, which was then expanded by Matthew. Donald A. Hagner assumes Matthew and Luke's use of Mark and Q, supposing that Matt 15:1-20 adapts Mark 7:1-23 to make it acceptable to Jewish readers and that Matt 19:17 is a revision of Mark 10:18.4 Grant R. Osborne maintains that the two-source theory should be applied to all the gospels—but he is also well aware that other options may be available:

The priority of Mark . . . can no longer be considered a given. Recent challenges to the "sacred" two-document hypothesis have established problems that cannot be answered by so simplistic a theory.

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¹W. R. Farmer, "The Synoptic Problem: The Inadequacies of the Generally Accepted Solution," Perkins Journal (Summer 1980) 20-27.

²R. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 2.

³D. Guthrie, New Testament Introduction (Chicago: Inter-Varsity, 1965), 1. 209-210.

⁴D. A. Hagner, "Interpreting The Gospels: The Landscape and the Quest," JETS 24/1 (March 1981) 30.

⁵G. R. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism," JETS 22/4 (December 1979) 315.

flbid., p. 318.

That other options are indeed available is confirmed by the appearance of three major publications, two of recent vintage, all of which discredit Marcan priority. The first was the 1962 publication of *The Synoptic Problem* by William R. Farmer (currently available from Mercer Press). This volume concentrates on the history of the two-source theory from the pre-Holtzmann period to the present, concluding with a form/redactional analysis of selected synoptic passages. The objective was to show that arguments for the two-source theory were based more on theological bias than on objective facts. Farmer's success was evidenced by the reception of his work as an "academic event." In the words of E. P. Sanders,

it is a rare book that changes anyone's mind on a subject about which he has already formed an opinion, and in that sense *The Synoptic Problem* is rare.⁷

Subsequent dialogue has been active with a number of scholars (Tyson, Dungan, Urrey) defending Farmer while critics such as Schmithals, Rese and Meynell differed. The most extensive critique was by J. A. Fitzmyer, who discounted the role of prejudice in Marcan priority and concentrated instead on defending Luke's use of Matthew and consequently Q.

The second major event was publication of Hans-Herbert Stoldt's thorough review of German origins for the two-source theory from Wilke to Weiss. Even more significant is the author's skillful criticism of classical "proofs" for the position. After surveying the domains of common narrative sequence, uniformity, originality, language, doublets, Petrine origin and psychological reflection, Stoldt claims that "the Marcan hypothesis is false—false in its conception, execution, and conclusion."

The reception of Stoldt's work was marked by a lively rebuff from Marcan advocate Hans Conzelmann, who accused the author of avoiding any true scientific discussion of the question. The subsequent reply by Stoldt, a trained philologist, provided material for a separate paper entitled "The Stoldt-Conzelmann Controversy," delivered by Farmer at a March 1980 meeting of the SBL. Perhaps more than any recent event, Conzelmann's reaction shows the role of prejudice as a primary support for the two-source theory.¹⁰

The final step in the demolition of Marcan priority is the recent publication of Farmer's Jesus and the Gospel (Fortress Press, 1982). This work presents a comprehensive statement of Matthean priority with reference to critical inadequacies of the Marcan position, origin and development of the gospel tradition, subsequent gospel genre, and finally development of the NT canon. An item of special distinction is that in addition to critical analysis a strong appeal is made to patristic testimony—an area all too frequently neglected in NT studies.

All of this is not to say that the Griesbach revival is a conservative movement. Indeed Griesbach's harmony was, if anything, "a harmony to end harmoniza-

⁷E. P. Sanders, "The Synoptic Problem After Ten Years," Perkins Journal (Winter 1975) 70.

⁸A sampling of reviews and articles concerning Farmer's work is available in *Perkins Journal* (Winter 1975) 68.

⁹H.-H. Stoldt, History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis (Mercer, 1980) 221.

¹⁰Stoldt's response was printed in Perkins Journal (Summer 1980).

tion."11 Nevertheless the movement contains elements that both benefit and challenge evangelical NT studies.

First, there is an obvious theological benefit in Matthean priority. All of the elements in Matthew that fortify a strong evangelical gospel may be seen as primary data (as much as that term may be used). The genealogies, vivid eschatology, miracles, great commission, and importance of the Church all assume a foundational integrity. If evangelical assumptions precede Griesbach's order—Matthew, Luke, Mark and John—an even greater emphasis is placed on the miraculous ministry of Christ and his Spirit.

Second, Matthean priority reminds us not to neglect patristic testimony. Clement states that "the gospels containing the genealogies . . . were written first." Augustine insists that our gospels "are believed to have been written in the order which follows: first Matthew, then Mark, thirdly Luke, lastly John." Origen observes that "the first was written by Matthew." Papias notes that "Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and every one interpreted them as he was able." 15

Third, Matthean priority presents the opportunity for a greater appreciation and application of form criticism. Surely part of the difficulty in utilizing this discipline is the fact that we have continually viewed it through the lens of Marcan priority. Once the assumptions of evolution and accretion are removed, can we not view such criticism as possessing valid truth? T. W. Manson notes that "if Form Criticism had stuck to its proper business, it would not have made any real stir. We should have taken it as we take the forms of Hebrew poetry or the forms of musical composition." Form criticism has departed from its proper business because "it became involved with understanding Mark as disconnected units devoid of historical value and stressing the doctrine of the life-setting (Sitz im Leben)." ¹⁶

Given evangelical assumptions, form criticism would seem to yield a positive benefit. The English tradition, for example, of classifying gospel material in groups according to subject matter or according to the audiences to which Jesus spoke does not seem extreme. How else can we hope to address the questions of language and logia? Neither does Mark have to suffer Matthean stultification if it can be viewed as a dynamic record of Peter's preaching.

The thesis of Matthean priority thus deserves a response in which it is evaluated with respect to conservative assumptions of contemporary authorship and inerrancy. Many would feel that this is useless—that evangelical convictions lim-

¹¹Farmer, Synoptic Problem 6.

¹²Eusebius Hist. eccl. 6.14, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1. 261.

¹³Augustine, Harmony of the Gospels 2.2, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 6. 78.

¹⁴Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.24, p. 272.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 172-173.

¹⁶F. F. Bruce, Tradition: Old and New (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 44.

it the value of historical-critical inquiry. But this is not so. The question of synoptic relationships is important regardless of time frames. Form critics, for example, readily adapted Gunkel's OT criticism to the NT, thereby reducing the time frame from hundreds of years to mere decades. Why should there be any objection to our reduction of synoptic relationships to a slightly smaller period of time?

Neither has there been any final resolution of the nature and extent of oral tradition, nor of the extent of interdependence among the synoptics. Robert L. Thomas has capably argued that "the option should be entertained that the three synoptists worked in relative independence of one another in producing their gospels."¹⁷

Also worthy of notice is the fact that the same patristic testimony that supports Matthean priority also supports contemporary authorship. Justin speaks of the "memoirs" composed by the apostles; 18 Eusebius maintained that Matthew and John left "written memorials"; 19 Tertullian that "the evangelical Testament has apostles for its authors." The fathers did not view the synoptics as anonymous accretions.

Then there is the scandal of harmonizations. But it is interesting to note that the same method is used by critics interested in proving their own position. J. A. Fitzmyer attacks the thesis that Mark based his gospel on Matthew and Luke by "on examination" reducing forty-six minor agreements listed by Farmer to six.²¹ Another critic, W. Schmithals, noted that "while the minor agreements will always remain the strongest argument for Griesbach, the agreements are nevertheless capable of other explanations."²² Farmer himself makes copious comparisons to establish the secondary character of Mark. Is all of this really so different from harmonization?

Perhaps the best example of the importance of synoptic relationships for evangelicals is the current debate over Robert Gundry's commentary on Matthew. Gundry himself feels that pursuing various synoptic options offers no escape because "whatever synoptic theory we adopt . . . somebody was making drastic changes." The only problem is that those changes seem to be much more drastic assuming Marcan priority than they do if Matthew is placed first. The latter is viewed as containing midrashic and haggadic embellishment. Mark's gospel is "relatively artless" and inferentially more historical. Matthew is seen

¹⁷R. L. Thomas, "An Investigation of the Agreements Between Matthew and Luke Against Mark," JETS 19/2 (Spring 1976) 103-112.

¹⁸ Justin Martyr, First Apology 66.7, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1. 185.

¹⁹Hist. eccl. 3.24.5.

²⁰Tertullian Against Marcion 4.2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3. 347.

²¹R. H. Fuller, Perkins Journal (Winter 1975) 64.

²²Ibid., p. 63.

²³Gundry, Matthew 625.

²⁴Ibid., p. 628.

as coloring Christ's life in both interpretation and facts.²⁵ The priority of Mark seems to affect Gundry's entire work, even though he is attempting to make an evangelical statement. Philip Shuler makes a very apt observation:

As long as one begins with the presupposition of the priority of Mark, discussions will naturally tend to begin with and to focus on the genre of Mark, regarding Mark's gospel as the pre-literary stage of a trajectory leading independently to Matthew and Luke.²⁶

The fact is that no evangelical solution to the synoptic problem is going to be found through Marcan priority. Scholars like Farmer and Griesbach have presented the elements of an answer. It is up to modern evangelicals to take that answer—Matthean priority—and adapt it to a conservative view of Scripture. Such an option requires three things: (1) a clear theological commitment to inerrancy, (2) an elevation of patristic tradition and resources, and (3) a reasonable and constructive use of form criticism. Relative to the latter, we seem to have two choices: either opt for Matthean priority and a reasonable exercise of form criticism, or accept Marcan priority and suffer the consequences of a more severe redaction criticism.

²⁵Ibid., p. 633.

²⁶P. Shuler, "The Griesbach Hypothesis and Gospel Genre," Perkins Journal (Summer 1980) 43.