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Sic et Non: Are We So Sure of Matthean Dependence on Mark?

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LET'S TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT THE VIEW THAT MATTHEW DEPENDS ON MARK, especially at the way in which G. M. Styler has recently defended it. The author then examines the pros and cons of the arguments and concludes that the case for Markan priority is not as open and shut as some would argue.

The second part of the title suggests precisely the content and conclusion of this essay on literary criticism of the first two gospels. It is granted that the *sic et non* is cryptic. By this phrase I am suggesting the method or scheme that is to be followed in presenting the case. It is, in brief, to pair the arguments for Markan priority in G. M. Styler's essay, "The Priority of Mark,"¹ with at least an equal number of similar arguments that speak, *me iudice*, as strongly for the priority of Matthew. Two other writings which figure either by direct reference or by implication in the dialog are B. H. Streeter's *The Four Gospels*,² by whom, according to Styler, "the classical statement and defense" of the two-document hypothesis was made, and Dom B. C. Butler's attack on the generally accepted view in *The Originality of Matthew*.³

It is the merit of Styler's essay that he abandons a number of the arguments for Matthean dependence advanced so confi-

dently by Streeter and others, particularly the argument from formal relationships between the synoptic gospels. Günther Bornkamm, for instance, can still write in *Jesus of Nazareth*:

This hypothesis in fact best explains the facts: (1) almost the whole of Mark's Gospel can be found again in the two others, (2) basically the order of events in them, in spite of much regrouping of individual items, is the same as in M [Mark], and (3) the wording of the Gospels agrees to such an extent that we are justified in maintaining the priority of the Second Gospel as well as the literary dependence of the two others upon it.⁴

Styler states quite roundly: "Butler is correct, therefore, in saying that the formal relationships do not by themselves compel one solution to the synoptic problem."⁵ Proceeding from a careful study of the parallel texts of Matthew and Mark, he bases his position that Mark is prior to Matthew on facts or arguments which, he holds, put the case beyond all reasonable doubt. It is the *sic* of these arguments to

¹ G. M. Styler, "The Priority of Mark," Exkurs IV in C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 223—32.

² B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1925).

³ Dom B. C. Butler, *The Originality of Matthew* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1951).

⁴ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 215—16.

⁵ Styler, p. 225.

which I wish to oppose the *non* of equally cogent observations.

One more preliminary before proceeding to the fray. In presentations of the arguments for the priority of Mark one frequently finds Matthew and Luke lumped together as showing the same general relationship to Mark. Thus Streeter has a summary statement of the main facts which show the dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark.⁶ The two dependent gospels are treated together, and it is stated, for instance, that in actual language there is a constant tendency in Matthew and Luke to improve and refine Mark's version. It amazes me to see how often this statement is repeated. Close study of the three synoptics where they agree shows, that while occasionally Matthew and Luke will agree in material and wording as opposed to Mark, the closeness of Luke to Mark as opposed to a certain remoteness of the relation between Matthew and Mark is persistent and all-pervasive. (For those who may like to test this, here is a small selection of paragraphs in Aland's *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*: 18, 37, 38, 42, 46-48, 123, 125, 255, 264, 269.) It simply will not do to put Matthew and Luke in the same category in defining their relationship to Mark. The case for dependence of both on Mark, if dependence of both is granted, has to be established separately and independently.

1. SIC

Styler's first argument concerns the relative roughness of Mark's version. This is one of his strong arguments. The examples he advances are grouped under several heads: grammatical variants, stylistic

variants, the well-known examples where Mark seems to be lacking respect for the apostles and even the person of Christ, and finally passages in which Matthew tries to find an edifying message in obscurities of Mark. He invokes in support the canon of textual criticism that, "other things being equal, the harder reading is to be preferred, since it is more probable that the harder should have been altered to the easier than *vice versa*." Even in textual criticism the canon invoked is not by any means to be used indiscriminately. In literary criticism it is quite inapplicable. In a comparison of two writers it is the style of the two writers that must be compared. Some men write smoothly, clearly, concisely; others are clumsy, inaccurate, and obscure. Mark is one of the latter class. A man who can put to paper the sentences of Mark 2:15 or 2:23 or 8:24 is capable of marring beyond recognition the best bit of Greek. It is just as easy to imagine clumsy Mark botching up competent Matthew as to imagine competent Matthew tidying up some of Mark's inelegancies. It is not possible here to examine in detail all of Styler's examples, but a glance at his "best instance" may be enlightening.

This instance is the difficult passage about the effect or the purpose of parables. Matthew is said "to be trying hard to extract a tolerable sense from the intolerable statement"; his "version" is further claimed to be "an unsuccessful attempt to simplify what he found intolerable."⁷ This very lack of success makes me doubt very much whether this is the actual state of things between Matthew and Mark at this point — all the more so because we can see in Luke's treatment of Mark something of a

⁶ Streeter, pp. 159 ff.

⁷ Styler, p. 228.

successful attempt to make Mark easier. Apart from some tidying up of language (τοῖς δὲ λουποῖς for ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἔξω, the elimination of τὰ πάντα γίνεται [Mark 4:11, Luke 8:10], the simplifying of the construction in the quotation from Isaiah) Luke has made Mark easier by the simple expedient of not using the last purpose clause of the quotation, μήποτε ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἀφεθῆ ἑαυτοῖς. What in fact is the simplest explanation of the situation between Matthew and Mark (if one is not committed to Markan priority) is that Mark has compressed Matthew's material, 13:13-15. He has omitted v. 13 and gone straight to the quotation from Isaiah 6, which he has quoted in part only from the text of Matthew, but he shows his knowledge of the total Matthean section by quoting the Isaiah material in the form of the omitted v. 13 (third person instead of second, seeing before hearing, whereas the Isaiah passage has the hearing before the seeing!). The idea of the fulfillment of prophecy in the Matthean version has been approximately given by the use of a ἵνα, or final clause. All this would have an effect on the exegesis of this key Markan sentence and even on the understanding of parables as a whole. Quite apart from what one thinks of this view of the passage, I believe it to be a temerarious venture to build any construction of Markan theology on subtle linguistic distinctions in his gospel. The plain fact of the matter is that he is such an inaccurate writer that one can argue only from the intent of larger units of his material and never from linguistic minutiae or linguistic detail.

Styler passes on to an argument which he regards as putting the priority of Mark beyond serious doubt: passages where

Matthew misunderstands Mark but shows knowledge of the authentic version at the same time. His example is the story of the death of John the Baptist. At this point it is claimed that Matthew (a) misses the connection between the story and the setting by asserting that Herod wanted to kill John, (b) fails to recollect after telling the story that it was told as a flashback, and so makes a smooth transition to the narrative which follows, and (c) begins by calling Herod a "tetrarch" and then suddenly calls him "king" and shows thereby his knowledge of the Markan original. As for (a), it cannot be denied that Mark has the superior story, but Matthew's version is sound enough and there is not that hiatus between introduction and sequel that is alleged. Matthew certainly "flubbed" his flashback, but this hardly proves dependence. Perhaps Mark spotted the error and corrected it. Matthew is inconsistent in his terminology in describing the position of Herod, Mark is consistent. Here again no argument for dependence either way can be built up. Styler, in fact, presupposes his position to argue on points (b) and (c) as he does.

It is the position of Styler that "the strongest [argument for the priority of Mark] is based on the freshness and circumstantial character of the narrative."⁸ The situation here is like that sketched earlier in connection with the smoothness and roughness of language. Mark is fresh and circumstantial as a writer, Matthew is not. But what follows from this fact in terms of dependency? Nothing! In fact, one could very well argue as follows: Given Mark's fullness and freshness, why would

⁸ Ibid., p. 230.

anyone want to obliterate it? Given, on the other hand, the bareness of many Matthean stories, there would be good reason for a writer like Mark with further information available to make them into something more interesting.

Styler's argument is directly opposite to the one he advances next. "It is hard to see why he should have omitted so much of value *if* he was using Matthew"⁹ (one example: the omission of the Sermon on the Mount). Streeter, I believe, is much more unguarded at this point and suggests that only an idiot would have done what Mark must have done if he were using Matthew. In making such a judgment Streeter forgot for a moment his own dictum concerning the reasons behind a purposive omission of material by one or the other of the synoptic writers: "for we cannot possibly know, either all the circumstances of churches, or all the personal idiosyncrasies of writers so far removed from our own time."¹⁰ One could hazard a guess at this point about the motives of Mark and suggest that, just because such a gospel as Matthew's already existed with its splendid collections of words of Jesus, Mark felt it unnecessary merely to repeat it all in another gospel and was content to concentrate on that aspect of Matthew's Gospel where he had a contribution to make.

The final argument of Styler is the one which I personally find the most cogent and the most difficult to counter. This concerns the nature of Matthew's narratives that are not found in Mark. The *Tu es Petrus* passage (Matthew 16) is not as difficult as the stories, chiefly in the first two and last

two chapters of Matthew, "which seem to stem from later apologetic, or even from the stock of legendary accretions which are evident in the apocryphal Gospels."¹¹ We would have to suppose that material of this nature existed earlier in the history of the church than we usually assume and that Mark himself omitted it through recognition of its inferior historical value or through the conviction that it did not contribute to the purpose he had in writing his gospel.

2. NON

In this second part of the essay we turn to sections, sentences, phrases, and words of Mark which point to Matthew as the source which Mark has used. I refer first of all to minor passages which are without point when taken by themselves in Mark but which gain some sort of meaning through reference to the Gospel of Matthew. (One has to be honest enough to approach this without a Markan priority bias in order to see the point.)

My first example is Mark 3:13: "He then went up into the hill-country." This sentence is at once followed by the reference to the calling of the Twelve, but no attempt is made to bring the two facts together. There is no necessary connection between the departure to the hill-country and the call of the disciples. Unless one is to suggest that Mark arbitrarily linked synagog (3:1), lakeside (3:7), hill-country (3:13), and a house (3:20) in this section of his gospel as a playful series of possible places for things to happen, one asks, naturally, what the purpose of the mountain reference is. We find that almost the same sentence precedes the telling of

⁹ Ibid., p. 231.

¹⁰ Streeter, p. 169.

¹¹ Styler, p. 232.

the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. It looks uncommonly as though the Markan sentence, quite pointless in its present context, is the umbilical cord showing where it came from. It has been suggested that a sentence like this one in Mark serves the purpose of modern footnotes, referring the reader to his source or authority. A similar example is to be found in the phrase of Mark 6:6b: "on one of His teaching journeys round the villages" (NEB). We have a very close correspondence to this sentence in Matt. 9:35 (cf. 4:23). This sentence, even more so than the one so far considered, is pointless in Mark, without contact before or after. In Matthew the sentence of 9:35, almost the same as 4:23, serves the purpose of embracing the chapters in between, which present to the reader the Messiah of word (Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5—7) and the Messiah of deed (the series of miracle stories, chapters 8 and 9). We seem again to have the umbilical cord linking daughter to mother. A further example can be seen in Mark 8:2. In Mark the reference to three days is quite arbitrarily brought into the story. There is no excuse for them in the previous material, which tells the story of the healing of the deaf-mute. But in Matthew the three days fit in with the preceding material, a summary description of the healing of many people in large crowds which gathered around Jesus. In Mark the three days appear quite without preparation. It looks very much as if Mark has used Matthew's story and incorporated the reference to three days into his new story without considering why they might have been mentioned in the first place. This is a far easier explanation of the relation between the two writers than to suppose that

Matthew carefully invented the previous scene to give some sort of a reason for the reference to the three days. A final example of this sort of activity at work is Mark 14:1: "It was the Passover and the unleavened bread after two days" (literal translation). The reference to two days at this point, directly after the little apocalypse chapter, is just too precise a dating for the situation. How much more natural a statement we have in Matthew: "When Jesus had finished this discourse, He said to His disciples, 'You know that in two days' time it will be Passover.'" How simple an explanation we have if we suppose that Mark, who has omitted all the material of chapter 25 of Matthew and who therefore cannot use the introductory sentence of Matthew for the statement in Jesus' mouth, reformulates, keeping the "two days," which no longer fit his new sentence. A simple slip. Arguing from Mark to Matthew, we have to suppose that Matthew, seeing the ineptness, created the neat use of the phrase in the sentence which we have quoted.

Now we turn to a number of passages which show the editor Mark at work on a text before him. In the lengthy section dealing with traditional and real defilement, where the material of Matthew and Mark is very close indeed, we find in Mark 7:18 the common word οὕτως, but the parallel in Matthew has the very uncommon word ἀκμήν used only once in the New Testament and rarely elsewhere. If there is dependence, as we all grant, then surely the argument that there has been an editorial change from ἀκμήν to οὕτως, and not from οὕτως to ἀκμήν, wins hands down. In the same section and in the very next verse of Mark's Gospel (7:19) we

have the little phrase καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα (not found in Matthew) in which the specific lesson for the church in Jesus' words is drawn by the writer. Plainly, the movement from the simple to the complex here is easier to see than the movement the other way. So once again we assert Markan dependence on Matthew.

Take a sentence of Matthew which has caused a great deal of difficulty, 16:28: "I tell you this: there are some of those standing here who will not taste death before they have seen the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (NEB); now the Markan version of the sentence: "I tell you this: there are some of those standing here who will not taste death before they have seen the kingdom of God already come in power" (9:1 NEB). A tolerable explanation of the sentence in Mark can be found; to explain the sentence in Matthew is extraordinarily difficult. Who would want to change the comparatively simple Markan form into the very difficult Matthean one? To make Matthew's sentence easier would be well nigh irresistible. Again, is Mark the editor? In the sequel to the story of the rich young man, Mark (followed by Luke) has a neat contrast between ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τούτῳ and ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τῷ ἐρχομένῳ (Mark 10:30). The corresponding sentence in Matthew (19:29) lacks this contrast. Surely this is a case of Mark blundering into elegance rather than one of Matthew deliberately seeking an inferior expression. The appearance of the sentence from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (6:14-15) at the conclusion of the story of the withered fig tree (Mark 11:25 [v. 26 is doubtful textually]) is quite startling, but Markan to the backbone, like his awkward insertion of the notice at the end

of the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter that she was 12 years of age. (Mark 5:42)

Dom Butler devotes a lengthy chapter entitled "Matthew's Great Discourses" to arguing Mark's knowledge of this material in spite of his nonuse of it as a whole.¹² For the full argument the reader is directed to Butler's work. It will be sufficient for the argument here to point to two of the more striking facts. The healing of the demoniac in the synagog, Mark 1:23-28 (a parallel in Luke but not in Matthew), is preceded by a sentence which is almost precisely parallel to Matt. 7:28-29: "The people were astounded at His teaching; unlike their own teachers He taught with a note of authority" (NEB). The sentence, of course, fits the situation perfectly, since it is the conclusion of the great Sermon on the Mount. Its appearance in Mark is without any real motivation. There is a mere reference to His teaching in the synagog (1:21), and then comes that sentence. It looks uncommonly as though Mark, who omits the sermon, still uses the idea of teaching contained in it as a transition from the previous incident, the calling of the disciples (1:16-20), to the story of the demoniac. The second example is the relation of Mark 13:33-37 to the material peculiar to Matthew in chapters 24 and 25 of his gospel. Up to verse 32 in Mark 13, Mark and Matthew run very closely parallel. The five verses of Mark with which we are now concerned complete the apocalyptic discourse for Mark, while Matthew runs on for 61 verses more, in which we have the comparison of the second coming with the flood followed by

¹² Butler, pp. 72—106.

the parables of the thief in the night, the good and wicked servants, the ten virgins, the talents, and the last judgment. However, almost all of the five verses of Mark are found at some point in the Matthean material, as the following list of parallels will show: Matt. 25:13, cf. Mark 13:33; Matt. 25:14-16, cf. Mark 13:34; Matt. 24:42-43, cf. Mark 13:35; Matt. 24:50 and 25:5-6, cf. Mark 13:36; Matt. 25:32, cf. Mark 13:37. To quote Butler at this point:

Quite clearly, Mark's five verses, found as they are in a context exactly corresponding to Matthew's sixty-one verses, and having connections of thought or language or both with almost every paragraph of Matthew's long passage, have a literary connection with that passage. But it would be preposterous to suggest that St. Matthew accidentally or deliberately worked practically the total content of Mark's five verses, in tiny fragments, into his own freely soaring and monumental structure; the more so, as the ideas conveyed by the "fragments" are often integral to the contexts in which they are found in Matthew.¹³

The alternative explanation is the natural one that Mark has compressed together in his own none-too-clear fashion some of the ideas suggested by his Matthean source.

The final point to be urged in this essay is the difficulty that confronts the common theory because of the Jewish horizon of St. Matthew's Gospel. We can best introduce this difficulty by reference to a number of passages which might have been mentioned earlier with those where we seem to see Mark the editor at work. There is, to start with, the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. The Markan account

¹³ Ibid., p. 83.

lacks the hard sentence: "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and to them alone" (NEB). And the further saying about taking the children's bread and giving it to the dogs, which in Matthew's account is declared to be not right, is in Mark's account less harsh because of the introductory sentence: "Let the children be satisfied first" (NEB). All canons of criticism that are usually invoked point to the dependency of Mark at this point. On the other hand, if Matthew has edited Mark, whether by use of another source or by deliberate invention, he has inserted into the original text of Mark a very markedly anti-Gentile sentiment. Not only that, he has inserted into his gospel a number of sentences of a similar nature, like Matt. 10:5-6: "Do not take the road to Gentile lands, and do not enter any Samaritan town; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (NEB); and the later verse in the same chapter: "I tell you this: before you have gone through all the towns of Israel the Son of Man will have come" (v. 23 NEB). We must also imagine him as having deliberately added the one word *σαββάτω* to the text of Mark 13:18 (cf. Matt. 24:20) to give that sentence a more distinctly Jewish flavor, and also as having added the reference to the "sign of the Son of Man" to Mark 13:26 (cf. Matt. 24:30). Where Luke has a parallel to Mark in all these places, the closeness to Mark and the difference from Matthew is most noticeable. All other aspects of the total problem put aside, there can be no doubt that in the cases just mentioned the simple explanation of the situation between Matthew and Mark is that Mark has eliminated for his purposes that which is too specifically Jewish in Matthew.

However, the real point of the examples adduced in the last paragraph is that they suggest, according to the commonly held theory, that the writer of the Gospel According to Matthew deliberately wrote a gospel with its very distinct Jewish or Jewish-Christian flavor after the writing of the Gospel According to Mark. Suppose we set this action in the 80's of our era, a pretty commonly suggested date. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, when Jewish Christianity was an insignificant movement, what would lead any writer to produce a work like the Gospel of Matthew? The sentences from Matthew 10, 15, and 24 quoted above plus several more would have to be regarded as deliberately archaizing. And that seems to me to be frankly incredible. On the other hand, to see Matthew's Gospel as a product of the early days of the church, reflecting the situation as depicted in the early chapters of Acts, about the time of Paul or just before, seems to have historical credibility about it. This is, in effect, to adopt the judgment of Butler:

One receives the impression that the controversy between Gentile and Jew had

not yet broken out in the Church when this Gospel was composed.

It will also be apparent that, if Matthew was a source for Mark and Luke, both of which works address themselves primarily to the needs of Gentile churches, it probably originated before the Church bifurcated into Jewish and Gentile parallel streams. In other words, it is not likely that the Jewish-Palestinian colouring is due to reaction; it is probably a sign of an early date.¹⁴

This essay ends as it began with the mere posing of a question. It is not an attempt to set forth a new solution of the synoptic problem. It does, however, register the conviction that one part of the commonly accepted solution is very inadequately based and that the facts adduced for Markan priority to Matthew have in great part been wrongly interpreted and assessed, while other facts pointing the opposite way either have been ignored or have not been seen in their real import. It is interesting to speculate what would happen to the study of the synoptics if Markan priority were ever dealt a mortal wound.

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¹⁴ Ibid., p. 165.