

## THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND ACTS

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### INTRODUCTORY ISSUES AND INTERPRETATION

The aim of this chapter is to show how some of the so-called 'introductory' problems concerning the Synoptic Gospels and Acts relate to the interpretation of the texts themselves. By 'introductory' issues, I mean issues concerned with the date, authorship or provenance of the documents concerned, the projected audiences of the texts, the problem of synoptic interrelationships, as well as the relationship between the Synoptic Gospels and other (non-canonical) sources, etc. The aim here is not to try to solve these issues in and for themselves. Such attempts can be found elsewhere, for example, in standard introductions to the New Testament, such as that of Kümmel (1975). Rather, the aim is to see how possible solutions to these problems affect, and are affected by, the interpretation and understanding of the texts and of specific exegetical issues.

In relation to, say, the Pauline corpus, it may be that we can deal with at least some of the 'introductory' issues independently of the exegesis of significant parts of the texts themselves. With a Pauline letter, for example, we can sometimes make important deductions about certain aspects of its circumstances on the basis of some of the personal greetings that come at the end of the letter, after the great doctrinal and ethical discussions. The Gospels and Acts simply do not have such personal details. For the most part, we are dependent on the interpretation of individual passages, or groups of passages, to make decisions about introductory issues; and in turn any decisions we make may well have an important bearing on our understanding of the passages concerned. We are thus frequently drawn into a form of circular argument from which it is not easy to escape.

One possible way of avoiding such circularity might be provided by evidence from outside the texts themselves. There is a certain amount of such external evidence from patristic sources about the authors of the Synoptic Gospels and their circumstances. However, much if not all of it is now regarded as highly suspect, if only because it is so often difficult to square with the evidence of the texts themselves. For example, the patristic evidence that Mark was a follower of Peter, or

Luke a companion of Paul, has been held to be questionable precisely because it does not seem to fit the evidence of the Gospels themselves. Nevertheless, even that claim is far too black-and-white, and the issues are by no means so clear cut. But on any showing, it remains the case that the resolution of such issues is integrally related to the interpretation of the texts themselves, and the relationship between exegesis and 'introduction' is one of continuous interplay and interaction. This can be illustrated in a number of ways and at many levels. I consider first, therefore, questions of date, authorship and provenance in relation to the Synoptic evangelists.

#### A. Mark

I do not propose here to discuss the issue of the specific identity of the author of the Gospel we attribute to 'Mark'. Patristic tradition probably intended to identify this Mark as the John Mark of Acts, and hence as a member of the primitive Jerusalem church. This seems very doubtful in view of the author's well-known apparent lack of knowledge of Palestinian geography (cf. Mark 5:1; 7:31) and of Jewish legal practice (cf. Mark 7:3-4; 10:11-12; though see also below for this in relation to Mark's trial narrative).<sup>1</sup> Much more uncertain is the question of the date of Mark, and this is connected in an integral way with exegesis of Mark 13, especially vv. 14-20.

1. *Mark 13 and the Date of Mark's Gospel.* Mark 13 is an extraordinarily complex chapter. Usually called the 'apocalyptic discourse', it purports to be a speech of Jesus predicting what is to come in the future. For Mark writing some years later, no doubt some of the events predicted have already happened. Thus what is future for Mark's Jesus is partly past or present for Mark himself. The problem (as with the interpretation of much 'apocalyptic' writing, which often uses a similar genre of having a revered figure of the writer's past predict what is to come in the 'future') is to know where the discourse slides over from the writer's past or present to the writer's future.

<sup>1</sup> In Mark 5:1, the author seems to assume that Gerasa is near the Sea of Galilee, when it is in fact c. 30 miles away; in 7:31, he apparently assumes that a direct journey from Tyre to the Sea of Galilee would involve going through Sidon and the region of the Decapolis, when such a route would in fact involve long detours to the north and south respectively. In 7:3-4, Mark states that handwashing was obligatory on all Jews at the time, when all our information indicates otherwise; and in 10:11-12, Mark's Jesus presupposes the conditions of Roman law, not Jewish law, in apparently assuming that a woman could divorce her husband. For details, see the commentaries on Mark at these points.

In Mark 13, the issue is complicated further by what appears to be deliberately cryptic and veiled language used in v. 14, referring to the 'desolating sacrilege' standing where 'he' ought not to stand. (The noun used for 'desolating sacrilege' in Greek is neuter, though the participle 'standing' which qualifies it is masculine.) Mark's diction here seems to echo quite deliberately language from the book of Daniel, especially Dan. 9:27 and 12:11, where the seer refers to the desecration of the Temple during the period of the persecutions under Antiochus Epiphanes. Most commentators have therefore assumed that Mark is referring to a similar kind of desecration of the Temple by non-Jewish intruders coming into the most holy parts of the Temple building.

Some have argued that Mark's warning here reflects the danger that developed in 40 CE when Roman troops threatened to enter the Temple building and put up a statue of Caligula in the sanctuary (Theissen 1992: 125-65). On the other hand, this danger was averted: after the pleas of Jews, and an almost incredible display of silent protest, the legate Petronius was persuaded not to enter the Temple, and the threat finally ended with Caligula's murder. If Mark 13:14 refers to this, then it must be a genuine prophecy, since the presence of the 'desolating sacrilege' in the Temple never occurred. Hence, Mark 13:14 must predate the Caligula crisis of 40 CE. For the dating of Mark, this must mean that either Mark's Gospel as a whole is to be dated prior to 40, or the source used by Mark here is to be dated prior to 40.

An alternative way to read the evidence would, however, be to argue that such a date seems impossibly early for Mark himself; and if this is a pre-Markan source, why has Mark failed to contemporize a tradition that surely cried out for some up-dating? Hence, another interpretation would relate these verses not to the threat to the Temple under Caligula, but to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE by the forces of Titus, when the Roman standards were set up in the sanctuary. Certainly the structure of the chapter as a whole suggests that the events alluded to in v. 14 are past, not future, for Mark. Mark gives two warnings of outsiders who may mislead the Christian community (vv. 5-6, 21-22), and almost certainly these reflect what Mark regards as real dangers in his own day. But the close similarity (though not identity) of the warnings suggests that both are thought to be real and present by Mark. This suggests that, even at v. 22, the discourse has not yet moved into Mark's future. Thus the event

alluded to in v. 14 is probably past for Mark. If this is the correct way to interpret the chapter, it provides perhaps the clearest indication that Mark is to be dated *after* 70 CE (cf. Hooker 1982, 1991).

However, one may simply note here the element of inevitable circularity in the argument. *If* we knew Mark was writing prior to 70, then we would have to change our exegesis of the passage: if we interpret v. 14 as referring to a (for Mark) future destruction of the Temple, this will entail placing the shift, from Mark's past or present to Mark's future, much earlier in the chapter. On the other hand, if we could be sure of the referent in the verse, this could have direct implications for the dating question. Hence the introductory issue of the date of Mark is integrally related to the exegesis of a key passage in the Gospel.

2. *Provenance of Mark.* The dating question may also be connected in part with the problem of the general provenance of Mark. The question of Mark's provenance, and the situation of the community for which he is writing, is a very wide-ranging one. Here I wish to focus on one aspect of that problem, namely, the question of whether Mark's Gospel is written for a suffering community. The Gospel is well-known for its great stress on the necessity of Jesus' suffering, as well as that of the disciples (cf. 8:34–10:52, especially 8:34–38). What situation within the community for whom Mark is writing might this presuppose?

Many have argued that such stress on the necessity of suffering reflects a situation of a Christian community which is itself suffering. This is in turn often connected with a possible date for Mark: the Gospel may reflect the situation of the Roman Christian community suffering in the mid-60s during the fierce outbreak of persecution under Nero, following the fire of Rome. (This is a standard view adopted in many older commentaries on Mark: cf. Taylor 1952: 31–32. This does, of course, run counter to the argument of the previous section which suggested that Mark was writing after 70, not in the mid-60s.)

At one level, the 'exegesis' of the passages on suffering in Mark is unaffected by the issue. The words, and the sentences, can be translated and understood whatever the precise situation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that the exegesis is always straightforward, even at this level. For example, the language in 8:34 about 'bearing one's cross' is notoriously difficult to interpret precisely: is this meant literally or metaphorically?

Nevertheless, the nature of the exhortations about the necessity of suffering is radically affected by the situation in which they are read. If they are read by a suffering community, they may provide assurance that any sufferings now being endured are not to be regarded as unexpected. If read by a community that is not suffering, they would be taken as perhaps dire warnings to Christians to take seriously the possibility of suffering: they could thus function as rather unpleasant jolts to a community that is in danger of becoming somewhat complacent (Hooker 1983: 116).

Given the fact that, in Mark, the warnings about the disciples' suffering hardly ever give any explanation of why such suffering would take place, the second of the two possibilities outlined above is perhaps the more plausible. It does not necessarily help those being persecuted very much to tell them simply that they must suffer. (Interpretations of Jesus' suffering in Mark are also notoriously infrequent [cf. only 10:45; 14:24], but even here such explanations apply to Jesus' sufferings alone, not those of his followers.) However, the alternative way of reading Mark is still well established, and this example shows once again the close connection between the interpretation of some passages in Mark and one's decision about introductory issues.

3. *Mark's Knowledge of Judaism: The Sanhedrin Trial.* Another area where similar issues are important concerns Mark's knowledge of Judaism and his account of the trial of Jesus. It is well known that Mark's account of the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus has the Jewish authorities acting in ways that seem to break a number of their own rules for conducting a capital trial (see Brown 1994: 357–63). Such a claim of course begs a number of questions. Our evidence for such rules comes from a later period, and we do not know if these rules were in force at the time of Jesus. We do not even know for certain if the Jews were allowed to hold such trials at all: their right to carry out a death sentence at this period is also much disputed (Brown 1994: 363–72). Thus it is not even clear that the hearing of the Sanhedrin was ever intended to be a formal 'trial' at all.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, we can

<sup>3</sup> It is well known that the Lukan account of the Sanhedrin 'trial' presents what appears to be more of an informal hearing than a formal trial (though see Brown 1994: 389). It may also be independent of the Markan account and represent a more reliable tradition of the events concerned (Catchpole 1970: chap. 3). Some of the alleged breaches in the legal procedure do not appear in the Lukan account (the trial held at night, the problem of the blasphemy charge when

say that, if our knowledge is at all accurate, Mark's account of the Jewish authorities, conducting what appears to be a formal trial of Jesus, has them acting illegally at a number of levels.

But how far is Mark himself aware of this, and how should we then read his narrative of the trial scenes? Could we say that Mark was aware of the legal 'shortcomings' of the Sanhedrin trial, and his story of the trial is intended to vilify even more the characters of the Jewish leaders? They do not of course appear in a good light in Mark's narrative anyway: they are the archetypal 'villains' who act as the foil for Jesus as the 'hero' of the story. But perhaps their failure to observe even their own rules shows them to be that much worse. Thus Hooker writes: 'The proceedings are a farce—and Mark has probably deliberately presented them as such. It is not Jesus who is guilty of breaking the Law, but his opponents, who claim to uphold it!' (1991: 357).<sup>4</sup>

This is certainly possible, though it does presuppose a certain amount of knowledge on Mark's part of such Jewish legal niceties. I have earlier noted in passing that Mark seems elsewhere in his Gospel to be rather ignorant about some details within Jewish Law (see n. 1 above). It might fit this evidence from elsewhere in the Gospel better if Mark were unlikely to have known any of the finer details of Jewish legal procedures. Hence, the apparent irregularities of the Sanhedrin trial of Jesus may be irrelevant for interpreting the story at the level of Mark's understanding or intention.<sup>5</sup>

At the level of any underlying history, the question remains unresolved. To address the question at that level requires detailed discussion of the regulations themselves and their possible dates. The issue I have raised relates only to understanding Mark's narrative within its own story world. At this level, the argument is probably circular (though other evidence from within the Gospel, but outside the passion narrative, may be relevant). Nevertheless, it may have a

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Jesus does not appear to have blasphemed since he has not uttered the divine name).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. more generally Lührmann 1981: 459: 'Der Prozeß...ist von Anfang an als unfair beschrieben' (though it is not quite so clear if this is intended as in relation to the Jewish Law).

<sup>5</sup> More generally, cf. Brown 1994: 387: 'While [Mark's] portrayal [of the Jewish authorities here] is highly unsympathetic, it is primarily one of fanatical intolerance, rather than of hypocrisy'.

significant effect on our understanding of the present form of the narrative.

### B. Luke

A range of similar problems, with the same inherent circularity, arises in the case of the Lukan writings. (I assume here without question that Luke's Gospel and Acts belong together as the two-volume work of a single author.)

1. *Date/Authorship.* Tradition identifies the author of Luke–Acts as Luke, the companion of Paul mentioned at times in the Pauline corpus (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Phlm. 24). One's decision about the accuracy of this may then affect, and be affected by, one's understanding and interpretation of key parts of the book of Acts, notably the picture of Paul which emerges from Acts and also the ending of Acts. I consider these issues briefly in turn.

(a) *The Portrait of Paul in Acts.* It is well known that there are discrepancies at many levels between the picture of Paul in Acts and the picture of Paul that emerges from Paul's own letters. These range from relatively insignificant details about chronology, travelling companions, etc., through to aspects of 'theology', the understanding of apostleship and Paul's presentation of himself.<sup>6</sup>

At first sight, it might appear that the issue of the authorship of Acts would be crucially significant in interpreting these apparent differences. For example, a decision that the author of Acts was in fact a companion of Paul might make one more inclined to seek to reconcile any apparent differences between Acts and Paul's letters, and to seek to build up a composite picture of Paul from the two sets of sources giving as much weight to Acts as to the letters. A decision the other way on the authorship question might make one more inclined to discount the evidential value of Acts in interpreting Paul as an historical figure.

In fact, the authorship question is probably not very significant in this context. Whatever one decides about Acts, the fact remains that the primary evidence for discovering information about Paul is his own letters; Acts is at best secondary evidence, written probably some time after the event. Moreover, even if the author of Acts were a companion of Paul, this would not *ipso facto* guarantee Luke's reliability or accuracy. Eye-witnesses are not always accurate;

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<sup>6</sup> See the survey in Haenchen 1971: 112–16; a classic treatment remains that of Vielhauer 1968.

conversely, accurate and reliable information can often be purveyed by a non-eye-witness. Thus, any theory about the identity of the author of Acts does not necessarily imply anything clearly about the accuracy of the portrayal of Paul in Acts. For this we are driven to the texts themselves, and to a comparison of Acts with Paul's own letters, and the troublesome lack of correspondence between the two bodies of evidence at a number of key points. The greater one judges the disparity between Acts and the letters to be, the more one might be inclined to decide against identifying 'Luke' (that is, the author of Acts) as a companion of Paul. But one must remember that, if Luke, as a companion of Paul, got Paul wrong and failed to understand key aspects of his thought, he was probably neither the first nor the last to do so!<sup>7</sup>

(b) *The Date of Acts and the Ending of Acts.* The issue of dating can also have a significant effect on one's interpretation of Luke-Acts. One aspect of this issue, which has potentially far-reaching significance for the interpretation of Luke's two-volume work, concerns the ending of Acts.

The last two-thirds of the book of Acts is dominated by the figure of Paul, recounting various of his travels and exploits, and the last quarter of the book is taken up with Paul's trials before various authorities, his appeal to Caesar, his journey to Rome to make that appeal, and his arrival in Rome. Acts looks very much like a 'life of Paul'. However, Acts breaks off without telling us directly what many assume should be the expected ending, namely the outcome of Paul's appeal and the end of Paul's life. Some have argued that this is clearly what the narrative should give us if Luke knew what had happened; since Acts stops where it does, the best explanation is that this is the chronological position of the author as well. In other words, the ending of Acts implies that Luke is writing in the early 60s; subsequent events in Paul's life have not yet happened and this is why they are not narrated (Bruce 1951: 11; Robinson 1976: 91).

All this does, however, is make a number of assumptions about the nature of Acts as a whole, and what Luke 'must' have written if he

<sup>7</sup> In any case, as Fitzmyer points out, if the question of the authorship of Acts is related to the 'we-passages' in Acts, so that the latter are taken as implying that the author was present at the events described in these passages, this would suggest that Luke was an eye-witness of a relatively limited amount of Paul's career, and this might also explain some of the discrepancies (e.g. in ideas) between Paul and Acts (Fitzmyer 1989: 5).

had had the chance to do so. In fact, there is more than one hint that Luke is writing after 70 CE (cf. Luke 21:20);<sup>8</sup> moreover, the words of Paul in his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus in Acts 20:25 ('you shall see my face no more') have seemed to many to indicate quite clearly that Luke is aware that Paul's final journey to Rome will end in his death (Haenchen 1971: 592, and many others). Hence it seems very unlikely that Acts can be dated in the early 60s, and Luke probably does know of some of the events that come after the point where his story ends in Acts. All this may therefore suggest that Acts is *not* a 'life of Paul'. Luke's interest in writing Acts is not primarily biographical, in the sense of giving a biography of his hero Paul. What exactly his purpose might be is another issue, for which there is not time or space to discuss here. Probably it would be wrong to tie Luke down to a single 'aim' or 'purpose'. But perhaps the issue of dating and the phenomenon of the ending of Acts should alert us to the probability that Luke's aim in writing Acts is certainly more than to give (just) an account of his hero Paul.

(c) *Luke 6:22 and the Date of Luke.* The issue of dating can also affect the detailed exegesis of individual words and phrases. For example, in Luke's version of the final beatitude in the Great Sermon (Luke 6:22), Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who will be 'separated': 'Blessed are you when men hate you and when they separate (ἀφορῶσιν) you'. Most would agree that what is mostly future for Jesus may well be, at least in part, past or present for the evangelist. What then is the significance of Luke's reference to 'separation' here?

Some have argued that what Luke has in mind is the formal separation of Christians from Jewish synagogues as a result of the so-called *Birkath-ha-minim*, the 'blessing on the heretics', which may have been incorporated into Jewish synagogues around 85 CE (Goulder 1989: 352-53). According to this interpretation, Luke thus represents a relatively late stage in the developing history of

<sup>8</sup> Luke here replaces Mark's reference to the 'desolating sacrilege standing where he ought not to stand' (Mark 13:14) by 'When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies'. (I am assuming here, and for the most of the rest of this chapter, the validity of the Two Source theory as the solution to the Synoptic problem, though I am fully aware that this is not accepted by all: see the discussion in section D below.) Most would see this as a clear indication of Luke's interpreting the enigmatic Markan verse by a reference to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE which, for him, lies in the past.

Christian–Jewish relationships, and reflects a situation of well-established formal separation at the social level.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, such an interpretation of the key word ἀφορίσωσιν in Luke 6:22 is by no means certain. The word is fairly general, and may in fact simply refer to a more general, and more informal, social ostracism experienced by Christians (Hare 1967: 53). It is certainly not clear that any formal synagogue ban was in mind.<sup>10</sup> The dating of the *Birkath-ha-minim* is itself notoriously uncertain, but even if we could date it with precision, we probably cannot use the diction of Luke 6:22 to date the formulation of this verse more precisely after this date.

2. *Provenance of Luke.* The question of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, or of that between Christians and Jews, is also related to another ‘introductory’ issue relating to the Lukan writings, namely, the provenance of Luke. What kind of a person was Luke? To or from what situation is he writing? These questions can be considered at a number of levels. Here I consider two aspects: Luke’s relationship to Judaism, and his social status.

(a) *Luke and the Jews.* It is clearly an important part of Luke’s aim in writing at least to address the question of the relationship between Christians and Jews. What precisely Luke’s attitude is to Judaism has been a matter of considerable debate.<sup>11</sup> At one level, Luke seems to present a thoroughly positive picture of Judaism and Jewish institutions in relation to the new Christian movement. The Lukan birth narratives present the key characters in the Christian story as models of Jewish piety; the early Church in Acts remains focused in its piety on the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem; Paul’s own travels all seem to start from, and return to, Jerusalem as a base; and (notoriously!) Paul is consistently presented in Acts as the pious Jew

<sup>9</sup> In Goulder’s overall theory, the interpretation of this verse is connected with his views about the Synoptic Problem: according to Goulder, Luke is directly dependent on Matthew for the non-Markan material they share, and hence the Lukan verse here is due to Lukan redaction. As we shall see below, Luke’s whole work probably does reflect a situation of sharp social separation between the Jewish and Christian communities of his day; but it is another matter whether the language of Luke 6:22 itself implies this.

<sup>10</sup> For those holding some form of Q hypothesis, this verse in Luke may reflect Q’s language and a situation of far closer contact between the Christian and Jewish communities concerned: see Tuckett 1996: 297–300.

<sup>11</sup> See the various views represented in Tyson 1988.

*par excellence*, especially in relation to his observance of the Jewish Law.

On the other hand, other aspects of Luke’s narrative, especially the story in Acts, present a rather different picture. For Acts also shows an increasing level of alienation between Christians and Jews. As the Christian mission spreads to various cities in the empire, the Jews are regularly portrayed as hostile and increasingly violent towards the Christians. Hence the regular refrain of Paul that, if the Jews reject the gospel, the mission will go to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46; 18:6; 28:28). And the final climactic scene in Acts 28 can be interpreted as in some sense representing the final break between Christians and Jews (Haenchen 1971: 729; Sanders 1987: 296–99). By the end of the story, Luke seems to show no sympathy at all for the Jews—there appears to be only implacable hostility. Is then Luke’s account in some sense ‘anti-Semitic’?<sup>12</sup>

Such language is probably not very helpful. Whatever the feelings reflected in the New Testament of Christians about Jews, there is no suggestion of their being ‘anti-Semitic’ in any sense of what that term might imply in a post-Holocaust era (though cf. Gager 1983). No Christian in the New Testament ever advocates physical violence against, and total extinction of, the Jewish people. But how far does Luke’s work suggest implacable hostility to the Jewish nation as a whole?

Much depends on how one regards Luke himself. Was Luke himself a Jew or a Gentile (see Salmon 1988)? Certainly any language of hostility against Jews, or some Jews, depends critically for its interpretation on whether the author was himself Jewish or not. Tirades against Jews by other Jews are a stock part of the Jewish tradition ever since the days of the prophets. Any accusations against Jews, however harsh the language, are thus in no sense inherently anti-Semitic unless one wants to tar Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah *et al.* with that brush. Language about the definitive rejection of the Jewish people by a non-Jew might however have greater significance in this context.

The situation is, however, probably not so black-and-white. The tradition about Luke suggests that he was a Gentile; but the category of ‘Gentiles’, or ‘non-Jews’, was almost certainly not a uniform one.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the discussion in Sanders 1987, especially his Preface, p. xvii: ‘I do not know what to call that hostility [i.e. Luke’s hostility to the Jews] if not antisemitism’.

Some Gentiles were clearly hostile to Judaism, but others were clearly attracted to it and adopted positions of varying levels of attachment to Judaism (see the survey in De Boer 1995). That Luke is in some sense very positive about Judaism seems undeniable in view of the positive picture of various aspects of Judaism already noted. Further, it is clearly of vital importance for Luke to show that Christianity is in some real sense the direct continuation of the Judaism of the pre-Christian era (cf. the emphases on the fulfilment of Old Testament texts in Luke 4:18-19; 24:24, 44, etc.). Luke is thus in many ways thoroughly positive about Judaism as an institution or religion.

Clearly, however, the negative picture in Acts remains, and it seems very likely that the force of the final scene in Acts 28 is indeed to show that, at the social level at least, the break between Christians and Jews is final. Luke does not seem to envisage any positive relationship between the Christian Church and non-Christian Jews in his own day. But this does not make Luke 'anti-Semitic'. Luke is also aware of many Jewish members of the Christian Church. He is also very keen to affirm the positive links between the Christian movement and the ancestral Jewish faith. Perhaps the picture that best fits the evidence is of Luke as a close Jewish sympathizer, but aware of the break that has already occurred between Christians and Jews. Yet, as with so many of the issues we have looked at in this chapter, the relationship between the interpretation of the text and one's understanding of the introductory problems is a dialectical one: one issue feeds into, and is informed by, the other.

(b) *Luke and Poverty/Possessions*. A similar problem is raised by the issue of Luke's evident concern about the question of money and possessions. Luke's two-volume work is well known for its commendation for the poor and its attacks on the rich,<sup>13</sup> and in the early chapters in Acts, the earliest Christian community adopts a life-style involving each individual renouncing any personal possessions (cf. Acts 2:44, etc.). Similarly, Luke's Gospel is renowned for the way in which the author seems to go out of his way to claim that disciples of Jesus give up 'everything' when they start to follow Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of the detailed 'exegesis' of individual sentences, or even

<sup>13</sup>Cf. passages peculiar to Luke such as Luke 1:51-53; 6:24-26; 12:16-21; 16:19-31, as well as Q passages such as Luke 6:20-23, etc.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Luke 5:11; 5:28 (Luke adds to Mark the note that Levi 'left everything' to follow Jesus); 14:33; 18:22 (Luke adds to Mark that the rich young man must sell 'everything' he has).

whole pericopes, there is little problem here. However, as in the case of the issue of Luke and Judaism, the interpretation of the broader picture, and how—if at all—the individual elements fit into a broader coherent pattern, can crucially depend on one's decisions about more 'introductory' problems: what kind of person Luke was and the nature and situation of his audience. The interpretation of material in a text such as Luke-Acts will critically depend on whether it is addressed to, or read by, a community which is itself materially destitute, or which is economically well-off. In the first case, the attacks on the rich and the promises to the poor would be interpreted as providing consolation and hope to an economically beleaguered community. In a way, this is very similar to the manner in which apocalyptic writings have sometimes been thought to provide hope for persecuted and marginalized groups in a society where they are in a situation of deep pessimism about the present world order (Hanson 1975). On the other hand, if Luke-Acts is read by people who are materially comfortable, the notes about poverty, possessions and the like become a sharp challenge to the listeners/readers to reassess their priorities and to reflect upon their life-style. Rather than providing comfort and hope, Luke's Gospel becomes a highly uncomfortable challenge.

It is probably fair to say that the majority opinion within Lukan scholarship today is that Luke is addressing an audience that is reasonably well-to-do and not economically destitute. The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) seems to be addressed specifically to property owners, not to the destitute—Luke's (probable) redaction of the material on love-of-enemies and non-retaliation in Luke 6:32-35 adds in v. 34 an exhortation to lend to all those who ask, presupposing that the readers/hearers do have the wherewithal to make monetary loans.<sup>15</sup> So too, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the focus of attention is primarily the rich man himself: despite the fact that Lazarus is (unusually) given a name in the parable, he is very much a dumb actor in the story and functions primarily as a foil to highlight the situation of the rich man. Similarly, the consistent theme running through the whole of Luke-Acts on the importance of practical charitable giving (cf. Luke 3:11; 6:30; 10:29-36; 11:5-8; 11:41; 19:1-10; Acts 9:36; 10:2; 24:17) again presupposes that Luke is addressing a community that has some material resources

<sup>15</sup> Luke's third exhortation here—to lend to, as well as to love and to greet, everyone indiscriminately—is widely taken as a redactional addition, slightly overloading the structure of the sequence.

with which to be generous. It looks very much then as if Luke's community is *not* economically destitute (i.e. 'poor'); the parts of Luke's two-volume work dealing with the themes of poverty and possessions seem to be primarily addressed to those who are not poor, challenging them to use the material possessions they may have wisely and responsibly.

This in turn may then significantly affect the more detailed interpretation of specific passages. Thus the parable of the rich man and Lazarus may be less of a statement about what will be, come what may (thus providing assurance to the 'Lazaruses' of the audience), and more of a warning to the rich in the audience of what might be if they do not change their ways in some respects (Bauckham 1991). Further, Luke gives no real justification for a model of poverty itself as an ideal. For Luke, what is promised is an end to poverty (cf. Luke 6:20-23). The model of discipleship as entailing giving up everything seems to be one that is confined to the lifetime of Jesus. Those who become Christians in the later parts of Acts do not make such radical renunciation, and there is never any implied criticism of them for not doing so. Similarly, the economic situation and set-up of the earliest Jerusalem church is not replicated in the later Pauline communities, and there is no hint that this is in any way reprehensible. The one thing that remains constant throughout Luke-Acts is the importance and value placed on the action of charitable giving (cf. above). But this again presumes that Christians are regarded primarily as potential 'givers' rather than 'receivers' (cf. Acts 20:35).

It is hopefully clear that the wider interpretation of some key parts of Luke-Acts is integrally connected with one's decision about the identity<sup>16</sup> and situation of both Luke and his readers.

### C. Matthew

A number of problems, very similar to those we have already discussed in relation to Luke, arise in the case of the interpretation of Matthew's Gospel as well. In particular, there is the issue of Matthew's relationship to Judaism. I consider this in general terms first, and then in relation to one specific text.

1. *Matthew and Judaism.* Even more than in the case of Luke, the question of Matthew's relationship to Judaism has been a key question

<sup>16</sup> That is, 'identity' in a very broad sense of what kind of a person, 'religiously' or socially, Luke was. The issue of his precise identity, or his name, is one of the less important issues.

in Matthean studies, with the constantly recurring issue of how far Matthew may be regarded as 'anti-Semitic'. This arises above all from the very violent forms of the denunciations placed on the lips of Jesus (and others) by Matthew to vilify some—or perhaps even all—Jews. The diatribe against the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 is well known. So too the famous (or infamous) elements in Matthew where the Jews (by implication) seem to be singled out for implied rejection and condemnation are equally well known (cf. Matt. 8:11-12; 21:43; 22:7, etc.), culminating in Matthew's account of the trial of Jesus before Pilate where Matthew has the Jewish crowds (not just the leaders!) claim responsibility for Jesus' death by shouting 'His blood be on us and on our children' (Matt. 27:25).

Now, as with Luke, the question of authorship (at least in a very general sense) is vitally important here to interpret such language. Is Matthew himself a Jew? On any showing, Matthew is closely related to Judaism. As is well known, he takes great care to try to rewrite some of the Markan stories that seem to show Jesus in conflict with the Law, so that Jesus is less polemical. At the very least, Matthew tries to argue his case on presuppositions that would be shared by a Torah-observant Jewish partner in any possible dialogue.<sup>17</sup> So too Matthew's vocabulary and mind-set seem to be typically Jewish. It is thus probably somewhat precarious to try to read out of Matthew's polemic about 'the Jews' a cold and sober statement about a 'theology' or 'ideology' of the nature of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism from one who is uninvolved in either side of the argument.

Many Matthean scholars today would agree that Matthew probably reflects a situation of direct confrontation between two social groups who, at the social level at least, are either at the point of, or have already, separated (Stanton 1992: 146-68). Yet this separation is probably not very great as far as spatial geography is concerned: the two groups are probably still confronting each other and perhaps are being extremely rude about each other. Indeed, the very intensity of the conflict may, paradoxically, be an indication of how close in many ways—ideologically as well as geographically—the two groups are.<sup>18</sup> Hence the nature of Matthew's polemic against 'the Jews' has to be read in the light of Matthew's own (probable) situation, as well as

<sup>17</sup> This is well established in Matthean studies. Cf. the programmatic study of Barth 1963.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Stanton 1992: 98-100, citing Coser 1956.



with the insights that a more sociological approach to conflict and 'sectarianism' (in a broad sense) can bring to bear.

2. *Matthew's Knowledge of Judaism: Matt. 12:11-12.* A more specific problem of exegesis arises in relation to the more concrete question of whether Matthew himself was a Jew. We have already noted that Matthew's Gospel is in many respects very Jewish. Yet at times Matthew seems surprisingly ignorant about aspects of Judaism. As is well known, he does not distinguish between different Jewish groups (Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees), and runs them together almost indiscriminately.

A peculiar problem arises in this respect in relation to a couple of verses in Matthew: Matt. 12:11-12. These verses constitute Matthew's addition to Mark's account of Jesus' healing the man with the withered hand on the sabbath, and are probably part of Matthew's attempt to alleviate the offence which Mark's Jesus might appear to cause in relation to sabbath law. In Mark, Jesus poses the blunt rhetorical questions 'Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath or to do evil? To save life or to destroy it?' (Mark 3:4) as apparent 'justification' for the action of healing the man on the sabbath in a way that it is assumed will breach sabbath law by constituting 'work'. (There is debate about whether Jesus' actions really would have constituted work [Harvey 1982: 38]. However, the fact remains that, in both Mark and Matthew, it is assumed without question that Jesus' action does constitute 'work'.) As is well known, the rhetorical questions do not settle the issue. The general rule at the time was that sabbath law could be broken to save life, but not otherwise. Here the man's life is clearly not in danger. Hence Jesus should not work on the sabbath; 'doing good' on the sabbath in these circumstances should then involve respecting the sabbath legislation and not working.

Matthew clearly sees these problems and tries then to rescue Jesus from what he seems to regard as a potentially dangerous and damaging stance in relation to the Jewish Law. Thus he has Jesus give a further argument to justify his proposed action by appealing to the example of rescuing a sheep from a pit on the sabbath. He claims that this is a legitimate breach of sabbath law, and asserts that the situation of a man in difficulties is both analogous and also more important: hence what one does for a sheep one will do for a human being. Thus 'it is lawful' (v. 12) to do good on the sabbath, and by implication to heal the man with the withered hand.

The major exegetical problem arises from the fact that, as far as we can tell from our available evidence, rescuing a sheep from a pit on the sabbath was *not* regarded as a legitimate breach of sabbath law. On the other hand, our knowledge is very fragmentary and its value uncertain: there is a later rabbinic ruling, and also a text from Qumran, explicitly forbidding this (see *b. Sanh.* 128b; CD 11:13); but the rabbinic evidence is late (well after the time of Matthew), and the Qumran evidence may only show what one small pocket of Judaism at the time thought, not what all Jews followed. Further, the fact that the case is explicitly ruled upon in the texts we have may imply that such a case was contested by some.

How then are we to interpret the evidence of Matthew? One could say, if we assumed that Matthew were a Jew, that the evidence of Matthew's Gospel itself could constitute evidence that this was regarded as a legitimate breach of sabbath law at the time (cf. by implication Jeremias 1971: 209). Alternatively, one could argue that, since all our available evidence (such as it is) is consistent in saying that such action was not allowed on the sabbath, then Matthew must be wrong here, and hence it is unlikely that Matthew himself was a Jew (Strecker 1962: 19). A third possibility is that Matthew's Jesus is appealing to common practice among Galilean farmers who may not have been so concerned about the letter of the Law when dealing with such a precious commodity as a sheep in a situation of precarious agrarian economic existence (Manson 1949: 188-89). On the other hand, while this might explain the saying on the lips of Jesus, or in an earlier stratum of the tradition,<sup>19</sup> Matthew seems to understand it as part of a legal argument to justify breaking sabbath law. Hence Matthew may have misunderstood the nature of the appeal, but this then simply highlights even more the question of how extensive Matthew's knowledge of Judaism actually was.

There is thus no clear right or wrong answer to the issues raised by these two verses in Matthew. The argument is circular, and one can go round the circle in different ways, or break into the circle at different points with different initial assumptions. However, I hope that it is clear that theories about the identity of the author of a text<sup>20</sup> are integrally related to the problem of how to interpret aspects of the text: one issue affects the other, and in turn is affected by the other so

<sup>19</sup> The saying almost certainly goes back to Q: cf. the parallel in Luke 14:5.

<sup>20</sup> As before, 'identity' here is meant in a relatively general sense. The specific name of the author is perhaps one of the less important issues.

that there can be no neat division of labour into the tasks of 'introduction' and 'exegesis', as if the former can be carried out independently of the latter or vice versa.

#### *D. The Synoptic Problem*

Another standard 'introductory' problem concerns the relationship between the three Synoptic Gospels, the so-called 'Synoptic problem'. What difference does a particular solution to the Synoptic problem make to exegesis or interpretation? Again the problems probably arise more at the level of the interpretation of broader issues than detailed exegesis of individual words or phrases. Certainly at such a broad level, the solution to the Synoptic problem that is adopted may affect one's understanding of the text significantly.

I focus here on two particular solutions to the Synoptic problem to illustrate the issues that may arise. One very widely-held solution to the Synoptic problem is the so-called Two Source Theory. According to this, Mark's Gospel was written first and was then used as a source by Matthew and Luke; Matthew and Luke also had access to another body of source material, now lost but usually known as Q. One major rival to this theory is the so-called Griesbach Hypothesis, according to which Matthew was written first, Luke came second using Matthew, and Mark's Gospel was written last using both Matthew and Luke as sources. How then is one's understanding of the Gospels affected by the solution adopted to the Synoptic problem?

In some ways it may be that there is little difference. The text of each Gospel stands as a literary entity, worthy of study in its own right, whatever the nature of the interrelationships between the Gospels. However, a great deal of interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels takes place via a comparison of the text with the alleged source(s) used by each evangelist. In this approach, a different decision about the nature of Gospel interrelationships can become quite critical. Nevertheless, the two approaches should be complementary to each other. Indeed, the extent to which the two approaches mesh, or fail to mesh, may be a measure of the correctness or otherwise of the source theory presupposed. To illustrate this, I take two issues, one in relation to Mark, the other in relation to Matthew and Luke.

*1. Mark's Purpose.* The first question concerns the interpretation of the Gospel of Mark. What was Mark's purpose in writing? What were Mark's concerns?

According to the Two Source Theory, Mark's was the first Gospel

to be written, and there are no extant predecessors or sources with which to compare Mark. On this basis, one has to take the Gospel as it stands to try to discover what the writer thought was important about Jesus. There is not space here to discuss this in any more than an extremely cursory and superficial way. However, most would argue that a feature of paramount concern in Mark's Gospel is the issue of Christology and the centrality of the cross: Jesus is the one whose appointed role is to suffer and to die, and whose true identity, as 'Son of God', is revealed fully in the light of the cross. Hence too, perhaps, the element of secrecy that surrounds Jesus' person prior to the events of the passion (cf. Räisänen 1990).

Using the Griesbach Hypothesis, a potentially very different picture of Mark emerges. Mark is one who is clearly anxious to preserve some (though not all) elements common to both his sources, Matthew and Luke. He appears to be one who is positively disinterested in Jesus' teaching since he cuts a lot of it out (e.g. all the material usually ascribed to 'Q' in the Two Source Theory, including the ethical teaching of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain), with the result that relatively more space is devoted to Jesus' miracles. He tones down some of Matthew's or Luke's high Christology: for example, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter in Mark no longer confesses Jesus as 'Son of God' (as in Matthew); and in the rejection scene in Nazareth, Mark writes in the fact that Jesus *could* not perform many miracles (Mark 6:5, cf. Matt. 13:58). Any secrecy elements are mostly taken from his sources. In all, Mark is something of an irenic writer, seeking perhaps to reconcile and unite potentially conflicting accounts in his two sources, Matthew and Luke, but with little new to add of his own.<sup>21</sup>

It seems clear that the two pictures of Mark that emerge here are not easily compatible. Indeed one could argue that the apparent failure of the two interpretations of Mark to mesh with each other is a serious drawback to the Griesbach Hypothesis. The Mark of the Two Source Theory is effectively the same as the Mark who emerges from a 'straight' reading of the Gospel as an undifferentiated whole, since *ex hypothesi* this is the only way the Gospel can be read. However, such a way of reading Mark, taking the text as a literary unity, should relate positively to the way in which a text is read on the basis of a source-critical theory. There should be some positive correlation between the

<sup>21</sup> Such a portrait may be a slight caricature, but modern defenders of the Griesbach Hypothesis have not yet developed a clear profile of Mark's Gospel as a whole on the basis of their theory.

two readings. The fact that there is not is in some measure an indication that the source theory in question fails to convince. Nevertheless, as with the other 'introductory' issues we looked at, the problem of interrelationships and the broader interpretative problem of understanding Mark are clearly intertwined and cannot be easily separated. Thus it could be that, if the Griesbach Hypothesis is correct, then Mark must be interpreted in a certain way, and this would also determine our more 'literary' reading of Mark as well.

2. *Wisdom Christology*. A second problem concerns the (relatively few) texts in Luke's Gospel where Wisdom appears in almost personified form (Luke 7:35; 11:49). According to the Two Source Theory, these are Q texts, and Luke's version probably reproduces the Q version more accurately than Matthew's parallel.<sup>22</sup> Further, these texts show a characteristic, and in part distinctive, feature of the ideas emerging from the Q material: here Wisdom is portrayed as the one who sends the prophets who in turn suffer violence; among these prophetic messengers are, by implication, Jesus and John the Baptist, so that this schema represents a distinct christological pattern (Tuckett 1983: 164-65; also 1996: chap. 7).

Using the Griesbach Hypothesis, or indeed any theory that makes Luke directly dependent on Matthew,<sup>23</sup> a quite different interpretation is suggested. In at least one of the passages, Luke has the reference to Wisdom where Matthew does not (Luke 11:49; cf. Matt. 23:34). Hence, if Matthew is Luke's source (as the Griesbach Hypothesis postulates), this reference in Luke must be due to Luke's deliberate redaction. The difference between the two Gospels is thus not a reflection of any Q Christology but reflects Luke's own concerns. On this hypothesis, then, a significant aspect of Luke's Christology would be opened up.

One could, of course, turn all this around as an argument (as with the consideration of Mark's Gospel) and argue conversely: part of the reason why the Wisdom reference in Luke 11:49 is thought in the Two Source Theory to represent Q's wording is because this idea

<sup>22</sup> For those espousing some kind of Q theory, Luke's reference to 'Wisdom' in Luke 11:49 is uniformly taken as the Q wording. (Matthew has 'I'.) See Tuckett 1983: 160, and many others. Luke 7:35 and Matthew's parallel (Matt. 11:19) both contain the reference to Wisdom.

<sup>23</sup> As, for example, in the theories of Goulder 1989, who argues that Mark came first, but that Luke is directly dependent on Matthew, not on some lost Q source.

seems so unlike anything else in Luke. Apart from these few Q passages, Luke shows no interest in ideas of personified Wisdom. There is nothing comparable in Luke's redaction of Mark (using the Two Source Theory) or Matthew (using the Griesbach Theory) elsewhere, and no evidence of such ideas anywhere in Acts, especially in the speeches of Acts (where Luke's ideas might most likely be in evidence). The implicit claim of the Griesbach Hypothesis in relation to Luke 11:49 thus effectively has to postulate a positive christological concern by Luke, for which there is very little evidence elsewhere in Luke's writings. Hence some would argue that this text is a positive reason for casting doubt on any theory that Luke is dependent on Matthew (cf. Tuckett 1996: 25).

However, we should note how, yet again, introductory issues and broader interpretative problems interrelate with each other. The former affect the latter; but equally we have to use the broader issues to influence our solution to the 'introductory' issues. The two are never separable from each other.

#### *E. Non-Canonical Sources*

In a final section, I consider briefly the question of other sources, from outside the New Testament, as possible evidence for the traditions found in the Synoptic Gospels. In this context, the most obvious such source for consideration is the *Gospel of Thomas*. In one sense, the issues posed by such a source as the *Gospel of Thomas* belong more within a consideration of problems of the historical Jesus, and these are dealt with in the chapter, 'Life of Jesus'. However, decisions about the nature and relevance of a text such as the *Gospel of Thomas* can have a significant effect on the study of the Synoptic Gospels themselves.

Ever since the discovery of its full text in 1945, a key point in discussions about the *Gospel of Thomas* has been the problem of its relationship to the Synoptic Gospels. The *Gospel of Thomas* contains a string of sayings of Jesus, some of which are closely parallel to sayings of Jesus found in the Synoptics. Is then the *Gospel of Thomas* an independent line of the tradition, giving us independent attestation for these sayings? Or does it represent a line of the tradition which develops out of or from our Synoptic Gospels? The relevance of the issue to study of Jesus is presumably clear. What though of the Gospels themselves?

If the *Gospel of Thomas* is dependent on our Gospels (at however many stages removed), then the *Gospel of Thomas* has little to

contribute to the study of the canonical Gospels. The *Gospel of Thomas* is in this view a witness to how the tradition develops after this stage. With the alternative view, the *Gospel of Thomas* is an independent witness to the tradition, or at least diverging from the Synoptic 'trajectories' before the stage of the canonical Gospels. It might then assist us in making exegetical decisions about Synoptic texts. For example, in cases where there are parallel versions of a tradition or saying in the *Gospel of Thomas* and in the Synoptics, the *Gospel of Thomas* might help us in determining which is the earlier form of the tradition. Thus Koester has argued that, if a 'Q' tradition appears in Matthew and Luke and also in the *Gospel of Thomas*, the version that is closer to that in the *Gospel of Thomas* may be more original (Koester 1990a: 61; more generally 1990b). Thus, one's theories about the nature of the *Gospel of Thomas*, and its relationship to the Synoptic Gospels, can have a significant effect on decisions about the Synoptic evidence itself, in particular the relative dating of parallel versions. A similar situation could arise in the case of Markan traditions, as the following example shows.

*The Gospel of Thomas 14//Matt. 15:11//Mark 7:15.* Part of saying 14 in the *Gospel of Thomas* reads: 'What goes into your mouth will not defile; rather, it is what comes out of your mouth that will defile you'. This is clearly very close to the Synoptic tradition found in Mark 7:15 and Matt. 15:11. Further, it is apparently much closer to the Matthean version in explicitly mentioning the 'mouth', a feature that Mark lacks. The evidence is (as ever!) open to more than one interpretation.

If one starts with the Synoptic evidence alone, then Matthew's version seems to be due to Matthew's redaction of Mark. The 'mouth' is thus due to Matthew's editing. The *Gospel of Thomas* then shows knowledge of Matthew's edited form of the saying and hence is to be judged to be secondary to Matthew, that is, it must represent a post-Matthean development (McArthur 1960: 286).

On the other hand, one could equally well argue that the reference to the 'mouth' is a very obvious addition and could have been added independently by *Thomas* and Matthew (Patterson 1993: 25). Alternatively, if one starts from a premise that the *Gospel of Thomas* is independent of the Synoptics, one could argue that the *Gospel of Thomas* is itself positive evidence for the possibility that Matt. 15:11 is not due to Matthew's editing of Mark, but represents an independent form of the saying (Dunn 1985: 263). If one's concern is to recover the earliest form of the saying in the tradition, then the

evidence from the *Gospel of Thomas* might be crucially important in opening up the possibility that Jesus' words are reflected in Matthew's version of the saying, not Mark's.<sup>24</sup>

For what it is worth, I find it difficult to assume a global theory about the *Gospel of Thomas*'s independence and to then use this to get round a piece of data that, on the surface, would appear to be clear evidence to the contrary, namely, an element of the redactional activity of one of the Synoptic evangelists reappearing in the *Gospel of Thomas*. Thus, the evidence from this parallel between the *Gospel of Thomas* and Matthew's Gospel may be part of a body of evidence indicating that the *Gospel of Thomas* is *not* independent for the Synoptics, but represents a *post*-Synoptic development of the tradition (Tuckett 1988). But, as with so many of these issues we have looked at in this chapter, one is involved in potentially circular arguments where the point at which one breaks into the circle, and the initial starting point one adopts, are crucial.

#### CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter has been to try to illustrate some of the ways in which one's understanding of aspects of a text are integrally related to 'introductory' issues associated with that text. On several occasions, we have seen that the relationship is often a dialectical one: the question of interpretation is affected by the solutions adopted to an introductory problem, but it can also itself affect the latter. Very often, as we have seen, there are no clear right or wrong answers to the problems concerned. At the very least, then, all those seeking to interpret and understand the New Testament texts should be aware of the circular nature of many of the arguments used in several critical discussions, and of the unavoidably provisional nature of any 'conclusions' drawn. For some, such indeterminacy is a disappointment; for others, it is a refreshing corrective to over-dogmatic claims by others and a welcome challenge to continue the exploration of seeking to discover what these texts may mean.

<sup>24</sup> The saying is of immense potential significance in relation to the question of Jesus' attitude to the Law, since Jesus in Mark 7:15 appears at first sight to be jettisoning all the food laws of Leviticus. Matthew's version is more susceptible to the interpretation that Jesus is simply placing different concerns in a relative order of priorities, but without rejecting the Law itself.

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