CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS: TEXT AND EXEGESIS

Joël Delobel has reminded us on numerous occasions in oral presentations and in published writings of the interaction of textual criticism and exegesis. The editing of a text, the choosing of one textual variant in preference to another, and the discussion of manuscript variants are all concerned with meaning; and meaning gives rise to exegesis.

Whenever a variant makes sense (as most variants do) then the ms(s). which contain(s) that reading would have been used, read and understood by its readers as if all of its distinctive and peculiar readings belonged to the canonical text of sacred scripture. If a church or monastery possessed but one copy of, say, the gospels, then its ms., however flawed some of its readings may be judged to be by textual critics nowadays, would have been interpreted as the original gospel text by its users, most, if not all, of whom would have been unaware that its ms. possessed any distinctive or peculiar readings.

The aim of modern text-critics is, of course, to try to produce a text that is as close to the original author’s writing as they can, dependent as they always are on the chance survival of a small proportion of all the ms. copies that were ever made, and in recognition of the fact that even our oldest surviving copies are several generations removed from that autograph.

To produce a critically established text is an obligation placed on text-critics by the wider reading public. But that proper, albeit narrow, aim should be accompanied by a recognition that sometimes the alternative ‘secondary’ text is important and needs to be displayed alongside the supposed original. Textual criticism can plot the history of Christian doctrine or exegesis as much as it can hope to establish an original text.¹

¹ See M.W. Holmes, “Reasoned Eclecticism and the Text of Romans”, in S.V. Soderlund and N.T. Wright (eds.), Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids. MI and Cambridge: Eerdmans. 1999), pp. 187–202, p. 201: "Obviously one cannot exegete (sic) a document until its text has been deter-
Textual variants that affect meaning by definition influence exegesis. That is especially true of those variants which involve a choice between a longer and a shorter text. One’s understanding of Mark’s intentions differs according to whether his opening verse (possibly its title) includes the words ‘Son of God’ or not. Similarly, the theology of Mark’s teaching on resurrection depends on whether one’s text includes the last twelve verses of chapter 16 or not. Likewise, the text-critical crux at Rom 5:1 or the variants at Heb 2:9 are profoundly important for one’s exegesis of their context. The way in which one treats the variants at the end of Luke similarly influences the exegesis of that Gospel, not least in the theologically sensitive area of the presence (or not) of the Ascension.

As an example of the need to be aware of and alert to all reasonable alternative readings, the Matthean parable usually known as the Parable of the Two Sons (Mt 21:28–32) has been chosen for this essay.

The parable may well have had a pre-Matthean origin. As it now stands, the parable is an interruption between vv. 23–27 and vv. 31b–32. The ideas in verses 25 and 26 are picked up in v. 32. The passage 21:23–32 reads well without the parable. (We may compare the insertion of this parable with Luke’s addition of the Parable of the Two Debtors into his version of the anointing story.) If Mt 21:28–31a had originally circulated as an independent unit, the message would simply be that actions speak louder than words. This parable about saying and doing in the context in which it finds itself is rather strained as an illustration of unbelief and belief in relation to John the Baptist.

mined, and in some cases the choice one makes regarding the text will significantly determine or shape how one interprets the text”.

2 Although the ἄνθρωπος [τις] seems to be defined as the children’s ‘father’ in Jesus’ subsequent question, the children are not called his sons. The common description of this parable as the Parable of the Two Sons owes something to a comparison with Luke’s Parable of the Prodigal Son. The two boys in that parable are υἱοί. Possibly Matthew avoids υἱός in Mt 21:28–32 because the parable following (Mt 21:33–41) may be read as an allegory, in which the landowner’s son is Jesus. In 21:28–32 the author would not wish a reader to identify either son as Jesus. If the ‘father’ in v. 31 is ‘God’ and Jesus asks which boy obeys God’s will, then there is a difference between the ἄνθρωπος in v. 28 and the πατήρ in v. 31, and the vocative κύριε (rather than πάτερ) in one boy’s reply is merely a respectful address within the context of the parable. (If there is a subtext here reminding us of Mt 7:21 then κύριε; = ‘Lord’: οὐ πᾶς ὁ λέγων μοι· κύριε κύριε, εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν.)

3 Possibly even without the answer to the question—and in many ways the free-standing parable (ending with πατρός) would be even more effective and characteristic of the gospels as an unanswered question addressed to the readers.