THE QUESTION OF THE BAPTISTS’ DISCIPLES ON FASTING  
(MATT 9:14–17; MARK 2:18–22; LUKE 5:33–39)

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1. Redaction or Parallel Traditions?

1.1. More Dissent than Consensus

All three synoptics tell the story of a question about the correct fasting praxis, which Jesus answers by means of several metaphors. There is widespread consensus about at least one problem of the pericope: the so-called “fasting question” is not one uniform tradition, but is a combination of at least two independent traditions. Jesus replies to the accusation that his disciples do not fast by means of a metaphor that contains a strong contrast: at a wedding, the friends of the bridegroom do not fast. But the joy of a wedding turns into mourning when the bridegroom dies (Matt 9:14–15/Mark 2:18–20/Luke 5:33–35). It is not possible, either in a genuine or in a fictitious conversational situation, for such a prediction of suffering to be followed immediately by metaphors of a garment and of wine, which are appropriate to a joyful feast rather than to a death (Matt 9:16–17/Mark 2:21–22/Luke 5:36–39). There is less scholarly agreement about whether these texts formed part of a pre-synoptic collection of five disputes (Mark 2:1–3:6/Luke 5:17–6:11). If the two-sources hypothesis is presupposed, one can also make sense of the combination as a Markan creation. A highly controversial question

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1 This example illustrates my approach to the questions concerning the transmission of the Gospels and the so-called historical Jesus. I have set out the principles involved in “From the Messianic Teacher to the Gospels of Jesus Christ,” in the first volume of this Handbook. Cf. also R. Riesner, “Teacher, Teaching Forms”, in Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus, ed. C. A. Evans (New York: Routledge, 2008), 624–630. I have presented the substance of the present essay on a number of occasions, e.g. in a guest lecture at the Protestant Faculty of the University of Basle in 1993.


is whether (as most scholars argue) Luke 5:33–39 and Matt 9:14–17 are to be explained as redactional elaborations of Mark 2:18–22, or one must assume the existence of other sources. The answer to this question can also influence the verdict on how much of both traditions goes back to Jesus. J. Ernst calls the fasting question a “pericope which is highly obscure in terms of the history of tradition.”

1.2. *Synoptic Phenomena*

The question of sources is complicated by at least three striking factors. (1) A. Ennulat calls “some of the agreements” between Matthew and Luke against Mark 2:18–22 “massive,” and there are in fact no less than four strong minor agreements in the second part of the pericope. One argument against a redactional explanation is that these minor agreements point to an underlying Semitic text (cf. 3.1 below). In the first part of the pericope, the πολλά (Matt 9:14b), which is probably original, is a minor agreement which corresponds to the Lukan πυκνά (Luke 5:33b; cf. Acts 24:26). Besides this, the clauses Mark 2:18a and 2:19b are missing in Luke and Matthew. The “western text” has also deleted the repetition of the rhetorical question at Mark 2:19a as a positive statement in Mark 2:19b. But the omission on two occasions in both Matthew and Luke of probably redactional Markan phrases in such a brief text remains striking. A similar concentration of positive and negative minor agreements also characterizes the entire (pre-)Markan collection. (2) In Matt 9:14–17, we can observe linguistic and formal Semiticisms which go beyond

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5 *Die “Minor Agreements,”* WUNT 2.62 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 77.


7 Although πολλά is missing in B and N*, it is difficult to explain as an addition in C D W LN, as is shown precisely by the πυκνά in N1, which goes back to Luke 5:33b. Cf. B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 20. Matthew avoids the adverbial use of πολλά which is common in Mark.

8 The periphrastic imperfect ἦσαν νησεύοντες (Mark 2:18a) is characteristic of Markan usage (V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St Mark*, 2nd ed. [London: Macmillan, 1966], 62–63). Mark 2:19b is one of his typical duplications (Mark 2:8; 3:7.8, etc.). The construction with ἔχειν is unsemitic.