SOME THOUGHTS ON MODERN TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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When I was an undergraduate reading Literae Humaniores at Oxford one standby was a sound and judicious treatment of traditional logic, JOSEPH'S Introduction to Logic. Over against it stood SUSAN STEBBING'S Modern Introduction to Logic. We all took the difference in title to be deliberate and the difference in the treatment of the subject in the two books justified this assumption.

Does "Modern Text Criticism" have the same kind of implication? With what do we contrast it? I remember meeting a Russian monk from just outside Moscow about 1958. I had just produced an edition of the Greek New Testament and so we talked about the Greek text. He explained to me that the Orthodox church had approved the Textus Receptus as being most in harmony with the spirit of orthodoxy. I asked him, "What do you do when you have the Textus Receptus on one side and Athanasius on the other"? He answered, "We follow the Textus Receptus". I then asked him, "What do you do when you have the Textus Receptus on one side and Athanasius, Basil and Gregory on the other"? He said, "We follow Athanasius, Basil and Gregory". In contrast to this, our textual criticism of the New Testament may be described as modern, but what are we to say of it in comparison with GRIESBACH?

To answer this question in part we may turn to two recent discussions of a major variation in the text of Mark, significant both for the Synoptic Problem and for the study of Mark itself, the ending of the Gospel:

(a) K. ALAND, "Der Schluss des Markusevangeliums" in M. SABBE (editor) L’évangile selon Marc, tradition et rédaction (1974), 435-470;
(b) W. R. FARMER, The Last Twelve Verses of Mark (1974). These two investigations seem to have been made largely in independence of each other. ALAND shows no awareness of FARMER's work and, though FARMER refers to ALAND's paper in his bibliography, in the course of the book he refers only to earlier papers by ALAND. ALAND
maintains the general opinion that Mark ended at xvi 8 and that both longer and shorter endings are spurious, but Farmer argues that we should consider the question of xvi 9-20 open.

Has Farmer any justification for opening the question anew? Without committing myself at this point to a conclusion, it seems to me that in principle he has three grounds. First, the textual critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who established the view that Mark ended at xvi 8, were influenced by the maxim _lectio breuior potior_. We may see reason for thinking, that, stated absolutely, this maxim widely as it was accepted has no validity. We can see reasons for thinking that the shorter text is right at Mt. xvi 2-3 and the longer text is right at Lk. xxiv 51, but this maxim is not one of them.

Secondly, it is quite clear that Westcott and Hort in making their decision about the ending of Mark, were influenced by the fact that in B, their Neutral Text, the Gospel ended at xvi 8. Again, as we may see elsewhere, the cult of the best manuscript has since then lost ground and scholars are realising nowadays more and more that we have to judge readings by their merits and not by the manuscripts that have them.

Thirdly, Westcott and Hort make much play with the history of the text and the genealogical method. Since then we have been forced to realise that the answers to our questions do not come to us by this route. Farmer himself has written of the study of the external evidence, "It does not produce the evidential grounds for a definitive solution to the problem". (op. cit. 74).


This means that the great majority of deliberate changes in the text were made at a time when our knowledge of the history of the text is slight or non-existent, namely in the latter part of the first century and in the second century A.D.