CONJECTURAL EMENDATIONS IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

by

DAVID ALAN BLACK

Long Beach, CA

The textual critic of the Greek NT is concerned with establishing the most probable wording of the transmitted Greek text from its surviving witnesses. However, anyone familiar with recent literature will have detected an increasing tendency to reject all the forms in which a passage has been preserved in the MS tradition and to resort to conjectural emendation to supply what is believed to be a more correct, or at least a less unsatisfactory, reading. This tendency is especially conspicuous in the recent literature on Matthew’s Gospel. The number of proposals is sufficient to constitute a definite trend which calls for appraisal. If the proposals are valid, they will at least oblige us to look at these passages in a new way. If they are not, they will confirm the judgment of G. D. Kilpatrick that conjectural emendation in the NT is “a dubious enterprise” which “is too often only one way among others of dealing with a problem in the text.”

Matthew 5:3

In his recent “‘Ihnen gehört das Himmelreich’? (Matthäus v. 3),” G. Schwarz has argued that the original form of Matt 5:3 contained the verb πλουτισθήσονται, which was directly antithetical to

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πτωχοί and which preserved the parallelism with 5:4 (παρακληθήσονται) and 5:6 (χορτασθήσονται). He suggested further that because πλούτισθήσονται could have been easily misunderstood as referring to a material kingdom, it was changed to αὐτῶν ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν υἱῶν ἀνών. But the earliest version of the first beatitude in Matthew must have read something like, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall be made rich.”

Readers at this point can assess for themselves whether or not this suggestion is convincing. In my view, however, this attempt at emendatio raises several objections. First, Schwarz can be charged with overlooking the obvious inclusio which marks out Matt 5:3-10, where the reward in the last beatitude (v 10) is the same as in the first (v 3). The repetition of αὐτῶν ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν υἱῶν ἀνών thus “establishes that everything included within it concerns the kingdom: i.e., the blessings of the intervening beatitudes are kingdom blessings, and the beatitudes themselves are kingdom norms.” Second, even if we do not emphasize the obvious grammatical shift between the present tense (ἐστιν) of the first and last beatitudes and the future tense verbs of those in vv 4-9 (in Aramaic there would have been no copula equivalent to ἐστιν), we should not overlook the morphological and syntactical differences between the various beatitudes, and should certainly not expect exact uniformity of individual lines and clauses. Third, the πτωχοί of the first beatitude are not poor in body but ἐν πνεύματι, an expression which cannot be taken with τοιχοθάτων. Thus the meaning of physical poverty, and vice versa material wealth, is hardly prominent. But the main criticism that can be directed toward Schwarz’s study is a methodological one: although his arguments in favor of πλούτισθήσονται have some force, they are not decisive. As Metzger has written, “The only criterion of a successful conjecture is that it shall approve itself as inevitable. Lacking inevitability, it remains doubtful.”

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2 G. Schwarz, “‘Ihnen gehört das Himmelreich’? (Matthäus v. 3),” NTS 23 (1977) 341-343.
3 Verses 11 and 12 have a different form from the earlier beatitudes and probably represent an expansion of v 10.