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# CONCERNING JESUS OF NAZARETH

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THE Gospel according to St. Matthew was composed and published late in the first century, that is to say, nearly seventy years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth. This dating is widely, though by no means unanimously, accepted by the NT scholars of our time. On this basis, we are dealing with a document which presents the tradition in a form which it had assumed two generations or more after the end of the public ministry of Jesus. This paper has the very modest purpose of summing up the conclusions that may be drawn about the state of the tradition at that stage of its history, with some attempt to distinguish between what the evangelist received and what he himself contributed in presenting it to his readers. Given the limitations of time, a good deal of what I say will of necessity be little more than an arbitrary statement of my own conclusions; I do not claim that they represent a consensus of scholarship.

We may begin with the observation that the totality of the tradition available to any one evangelist was defective, even before he reduced the stock in his notebooks by selection in accordance with his estimate of what was necessary and relevant to his purpose in writing. The original nucleus of the tradition concerning Jesus was given in the personal recollections of eyewitnesses, as these were communicated by the immediate disciples of Jesus and a relatively large number of other people who had seen him and heard him speak during the brief period of his ministry. Jesus left nothing in writing, and gave no charge to his followers to prepare a written record of his sayings or of his deeds. They were commissioned to preach, not to write, and the substance of their recollections was in fact not committed to writing in any degree for a number of years; the greater part of those recollections were never committed to writing at all. All the gospels put together contain only a small proportion of the things that Jesus said and did, or even of what was remembered in the communities at the time that they were written. Like the others, the Gospel according to St. Matthew represents a selection made by him, in keeping with his own conception of what was relevant and necessary for the times, from a considerably wider range of materials which were even then available in the oral traditions of his community and such written sources as had come into his hands. This in turn would represent a stock considerably diminished from that

which would have been available shortly after the crucifixion — say on the first Christian Pentecost — if there had been any desire at that time to prepare a complete record for the archives of the nascent society of believers. We have to recognize, then, that we are dealing in this gospel — the same thing is true if we take all the gospels together — with a record based on a diminished stock of materials. Much of what would have been available two generations earlier had already been lost simply because it ceased to be repeated by the preachers and teachers; and much of what was still extant was not incorporated into his work by this evangelist or by any or all of them. “There were many other things which Jesus did [and said]”; “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book.”<sup>2</sup> The words are just as applicable to the Gospel of Matthew as to the Gospel of John. We are dealing with a document that is incomplete, fragmentary, deficient.

But if the tradition had been diminished by the loss of stories and sayings which had once been remembered, we can hardly fail to see that it had been enlarged by the admission of both sayings and incidents which derived from other sources. This principle would not be so generally accepted as the first, but it is really inconceivable — contrary to all that we know of the transmission of other traditions — that the story of Jesus should remain immune to the tendency to transfer to it tales that had been told earlier in relation to others, and sayings which were first uttered by other lips. The question is not whether this type of contamination has taken place, but how far it extends. Few of us, I take it, would go along with the notion that the incidents of the gospel story were transferred in the mass from folk tales of Heracles, or from a pattern-making Life of Pythagoras, or from OT stories of wonder-working prophets, or from haggadic midrashim on the life of Moses. But there are elements of our gospels, and of the Gospel according to St. Matthew in particular, which appear to find their most reasonable explanation along these lines; and we may without undue boldness conjecture that such elements were much more widespread in the oral tradition — that they were to some extent screened out by the writers.

A special — perhaps unique — type of addition to the store of genuine reminiscences of Jesus is to be found in the transfer to the story of the public ministry of events which were originally conceived as activities of the risen Jesus, and of sayings which first took shape as utterances of the risen Jesus. The transfiguration, even the messianic confession which precedes it, the epiphanytype story of the call of the first disciples as it is recounted by Luke — these and other incidents which are set within the framework of the public ministry may have

<sup>2</sup> John 21 25, 20 30.

originated as stories of appearances of the risen Jesus, "visions and revelations of the Lord." With much less hesitation, we can affirm that a number of sayings in all the gospels, and in all the sources which they employ, so clearly presuppose a postresurrection situation that they can hardly have originated except as sayings of the risen Jesus. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" — these words, for instance, clearly presuppose a Jesus who is no longer limited by space and time; and this saying is by no means unique in this respect. The early church, of course, had no motive for making a distinction between sayings of the historical Jesus and sayings of the risen Lord. They were far from attaching any lesser authority to the latter.

Another factor of great importance in the history of the tradition is the effect of the transference of the gospel from Jewish to gentile soil, and from a Palestinian environment to the hellenistic life of the Roman empire — mainly to its eastern provinces, and to the Levantine populations of Rome and other western cities — within the first generation. The fact that all our gospels are written in Greek is evidence enough of the sweeping sociological change that had taken place; and this is confirmed for a still earlier period by the astonishing assumption of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans — which cannot possibly be dated later than 58 — that the church is predominantly gentile, and that he must now plead with gentile Christians to recognize that God has still a place for Jews in the Christian community and in the economy of salvation. This means that the tradition in its manifold elements had to be translated into Greek, and that the transmission took place to a large extent in Greek, before it was committed to writing. We cannot rule out the possibility — indeed we should accept this as a probability rather than a possibility — that some of it was committed to writing in Aramaic, even though we reject the theory of an Aramaic proto-Matthew which is still cherished in a diluted form by virtually all Roman Catholic scholars. (Naturally, we reject still more brusquely the theory of the late C. C. Torrey that all our gospels are translations of Aramaic originals.) A fair amount of material in the synoptics looks like the literal translation of an Aramaic source, either written or oral, and in some cases, for instance, in the case of the parable of the sower in St. Mark, the evangelist probably had before him an Aramaic collection, or a literal translation of a collection originally set down in Aramaic. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that by the later years of the first century, and probably by the seventies, if not still earlier, the transmission of the tradition was made chiefly by men who spoke Greek, and knew the tradition only in its Greek dress. Now anyone who has had experience in translation is aware of the fact that any translation involves some measure of refraction, even of distortion, of the original,

no matter how competent the translator may be, and it would be absurd to suppose that the translation of stories about Jesus and sayings of Jesus was restricted to men of undoubted competence. Translation into Greek and transmission in Greek add a further element of modification in the substance of the original tradition.

In the case of the Gospel according to St. Matthew we have the peculiar feature, difficult to assess, that it came out of a bilingual society, in which both Greek and Aramaic were used fairly freely. Since the gospel was composed in Greek, and its principal written source (the Gospel according to St. Mark) was a Greek document, it is probable that the author and his readers used Greek as their principal medium of intercourse, and that the oral tradition known to them circulated mainly in Greek; but it is likely that some elements of it were currently available to them in Aramaic—partly, it may be, in writing, and partly oral. All this is based upon the assumption that the gospel itself is the product of the Antioch region or, if you prefer Kilpatrick's suggestion, the Phoenician coast. But in any case, there was nothing sacrosanct for them—and there need not be for us—about Aramaic traditions; and we have no reason to suppose that if they had parallel fragments of tradition available in both Greek and Aramaic, they would be inclined to subordinate the understanding of the Greek form to its Aramaic partner. "Aramaic" is not a synonym for "authentic," even though it seems to be taken in that sense by some of our colleagues. To some degree, for Matthew as well as for the other evangelists, the sense of the tradition as he received it was affected by its rendering into and its transmission for some time in Greek.

Joachim Jeremias discounts the distorting effect of translation, largely because he is confident of his ability to recover the original sense by retranslating into Aramaic, even though he admits that "every intelligent person will realize the tentative nature of such retranslations."<sup>2</sup> But he has analyzed very comprehensively the many other factors which have entered into the transmission of the parables. He calls them "principles [or "laws"] of transformation." His work is so familiar to all of us that I need only list his ten "laws of transformation."<sup>3</sup>

- i. Translation into Greek
- ii. Representational changes (substitution of hellenistic practices and furnishings for Palestinian; this is not particularly applicable to Matthew, where we see rather a tendency to recast hellenized materials into a Palestinian shape)
- iii. Embellishment

<sup>2</sup> *The Parables of Jesus* (rev. ed., 1963), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 113 f.

- iv. Influence of the OT and of folk story themes
  - v. The change of audience (especially from opponents to disciples; this is most marked in Matthew)
  - vi. A shift of emphasis to the hortatory, especially from the eschatological
  - vii. The influence of the church's situation; subdivided under (a) the delay of the parousia, (b) the missionary situation, and (c) regulations for the leadership of the church
  - viii. Allegorization (particularly marked in Matthew)
  - ix. Collection and conflation (this too is done more frequently and consistently by Matthew than by the others)
  - x. Changes of setting, which "often produced a change in the meaning"; the supplying of introductions and generalizing conclusions

All of these "laws of transformation" have been operative in the oral tradition and also in the editorial work of the evangelists. But it is important to keep in mind that similar tendencies have had an equally penetrating effect upon the nonparabolic elements of the tradition, though they have not been traced out in the same systematic way. Let me add that I no longer believe that the process can be successfully reversed, as Jeremias claims and attempts to do. Nor am I at all confident that "a return to the living voice of Jesus" or a recovery of "the original tones of the utterances of Jesus" would be so great a gain as Jeremias imagines. After all, it is perhaps easier for us to come into an effective *rapproch* with Jesus through the medium of the refracted tradition of the gospels, which grew out of prolonged and varied efforts to make him comprehensible to another age and to a different culture, than through an exact verbatim report of his original sayings, in his native Aramaic, in the precise form and context in which they were first delivered.

We have now to take note of the fact that for its narrative, the Gospel according to St. Matthew makes astonishingly little use of the traditions which were in circulation in its immediate environment. We take it that it was composed and published for a Christian community of Syria not too far removed from Antioch on the Orontes. Let us recall, then, that Antioch had been evangelized something like sixty years earlier, in the course of the persecution that arose around Stephen, by fugitives from Jerusalem, who presumably carried with them some account of Jesus. It had been visited by several leading members of the mother church in Jerusalem — notably Barnabas, Peter, and the prophets Judas and Silas ("leading men among the brethren").<sup>4</sup> Thus it

<sup>4</sup> Acts 15 22.

had every opportunity of receiving a reliable store of information about Jesus very early in its history, and from the fountainhead — the mother church itself and even from the very Prince of the Apostles. If Matthew did not write in Antioch itself, the store of tradition of the great Syrian metropolis was available to him. In view of this, it is truly astounding to observe that Matthew derives the narrative structure of his gospel, not from the tradition independently preserved in his own church, but from the Gospel according to St. Mark, which had been published at Rome (as is generally supposed) some thirty or forty years earlier. This would be almost equally astonishing if we accepted a date in the seventies for Matthew — perhaps even more so, in that the Antiochene traditions would be that much closer to their origins.

It is hardly necessary to review even in broad lines the extent of the dependence of Matthew upon Mark, for its narrative. It extends to the whole of his gospel, apart from the cycle of nativity stories, but is perhaps most striking in the structure of the passion narrative. Now it is very hard to imagine that the churches of western Syria had to wait until a copy of Mark came into their hands to learn of the baptism of Jesus by John, or of the call of his first disciples, or of his controversies with scribes and Pharisees, and of all the other anecdotes which make up the Markan narrative; but it is beyond all the bounds of the credible that they should not have had their own account of the passion. If there is one area of agreement among scholars, it is in the recognition that the passion narrative took shape as a coherent, consecutive account of events far earlier and far more consistently than the rest of the gospel material. It is utterly inconceivable that the church of St. Matthew should have had to wait upon the publication of Mark to learn of this part of the story of Jesus. Yet even in this area, Matthew takes over for his own use the story as it was set down by Mark; and such changes as he makes do not in any instance contribute one single new fact, except the naming of Caiaphas. Some of his additions appear indeed to come from the local traditions of Jerusalem, but they are not any the more authentic for that — they are popular tales, legend, and that sort of thing. They do not enable us to fill in or to correct the Markan narrative in the slightest degree.

The Gospel according to St. Matthew is from one point of view a revised and enlarged edition of Mark; but it is abundantly evident that the main purpose of his revision is not to give a more complete account of events in the life of Jesus, but to give a more adequate record of the *teachings* of the Lord, beginning with the sermon on the mount, which owes nothing whatever to Mark. He retains the basic framework of Mark, and virtually the whole of its narrative material in detail; but upon it he has superimposed a new framework, which is not narrative at all, but consists of a number of collections of sayings of Jesus,

arranged in the form of connected discourses, and it is precisely in this *arrangement* of the discourse material that he has made his own principal contribution. We are left with the impression that Matthew is not greatly interested in the story for its own sake, but only — or primarily — as a series of demonstrations of how ancient prophecies were fulfilled in the life of the Messiah. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophets."

In addition to the narrative, for which he is the only significant source, Mark has also supplied Matthew with a certain amount of discourse material (sayings of Jesus), but in this area he is no longer the principal source; and where Markan discourse material is used by Matthew, it is almost always combined with more abundant materials drawn from other sources. The outstanding feature of Matthew is the five great collections of sayings, organized into the form of continuous discourses of Jesus, and terminated by a kind of rubric which at the same time serves as the formula of transition to the next section of narrative. These five major discourses are (i) the sermon on the mount, chs. 5 to 7; (ii) the mission charge, ch. 10; (iii) the book of parables, ch. 13; (iv) the manual of discipline, or church order, ch. 18; and (v) the discourse on the last things, chs. 23–25. The fifth discourse may equally well be treated as a double collection, if we prefer to look upon the discourse against the scribes and Pharisees (ch. 24) as a separate collection of sayings (as is done, for instance, by J. Schmid); but as it culminates in the pronouncement of judgment upon Israel, it seems better to take it as the first section of the wider discourse on the last things.

Besides these five collections, which constitute the basic framework of the book, Matthew includes four much briefer groups of sayings, which we may add to our list, to wit: (vi) a discourse on demon possession (Beelzebul), 12<sup>25–45</sup>; (vii) a discourse on the way of the cross, 16<sup>21–28</sup>; (viii) a discourse on the dangers of wealth and the rewards of discipleship, 19<sup>23–30</sup>; and (ix) a second collection of parables, 21<sup>28–22 14</sup>.

Of all these, only the sermon on the mount is wholly lacking in Mark. For the mission charge, Mark provides — at most — parts of 14 verses out of the 42. All but four of these are transferred from a different context, and even these four appear to be conflated with an independent parallel source. The book of parables is built around the smaller parable collection of Mark 4, with the omission of one parable and the addition of four others, together with a certain amount of nonparabolic sayings-material. The manual of discipline is in part a radical re-writing of the amorphous concatenation of sayings in Mark 9<sup>33–48</sup>, with notable additions from other sources, including two important parables. The discourse on the last things falls into three parts. The first part, directed against the scribes and Pharisees, includes only two Markan verses

(out of a total of thirty-eight), and these are recast to form one of the seven woes. The second part is drawn largely from the Markan apocalypse (Mark 13), with some omissions and some brief supplements; and the third part — the whole of ch. 25 — is in its entirety non-Markan. The four shorter collections give much the same picture. The discourse on demon possession has a partial parallel in Mark 3 23-30, but there is no close similarity in wording except for one verse, and there are eleven verses which have no parallel in Mark at all. The discourse on the way of the cross is taken directly from Mark, with changes that suggest editorial re-writing, rather than the use of any independent source. The discourse on the dangers of wealth is drawn directly, and almost word for word, from Mark, except for a single verse; and, as in Mark, it is attached to the incident of the rich man who refused to give up his wealth in order to follow Jesus. The second collection of parables includes only one that is taken from Mark, and that one (the parable of the wicked tenant farmers) is significantly pointed by additions and revisions which are probably to be attributed to the editorial work of the evangelist, rather than to the use of another source.

By far the greater part of the discourse material in Matthew is not derived from Mark, and it is in this great and important area, if anywhere, that we must look for traces of the traditions which had been preserved in his own church — that is to say, substantially, the early traditions received by Antioch from Jerusalem, even to some extent from Peter himself — in the form which they had assumed as a result of some decades of transmission by word of mouth. This is not to say, of course, that everything non-Markan in the Matthean sayings material is drawn from the stores of his own region. If he drew practically the whole of his narrative material from a document published a generation earlier in another region, there is no immediate reason for supposing that he would not draw upon another document, or other documents, from other areas, for some or all of the sayings which he attributes to Jesus. But we may at least say that if his own church did possess some store of traditions, and attached some value to them — and especially if, as we have suggested, some of them stemmed from the emissaries of the primitive church in Jerusalem and even from St. Peter in person — then it is in the sayings collections that we must look for traces of them. It would be quite unreasonably skeptical, indeed, not to recognize it as a probability that the sayings do contain a fair proportion of materials transmitted in the churches of the Antioch region, and at least a core of sayings that go back to the tradition originally received from responsible and representative leaders of the Jerusalem church.

But perhaps the most remarkable feature of this gospel is the attribution to Jesus of sayings which have been composed by the evangelist himself. Some of his materials are not derived from any tradition,

written or oral, faithful or distorted, but from his own mind and pen. We may cite as our most conspicuous example the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares ("darnel," if you like; I never hear the word "darnel" or the word "tares" except in connection with this parable). It is generally recognized that the interpretation of the parable of the sower in Mark is not the work of Jesus, but the deposit of an early midrash which was framed in the Palestinian church; and Matthew takes this over with little change. But no one supposes that Mark himself composed that interpretation; he found it attached to the parable in his source and simply reproduced it. But Matthew did not find his interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares in any source; he composed it himself. He even went so far as to introduce extraneous elements into the very parable in order to pave the way for the allegorizing interpretation which he had in mind. After bringing forward no less than thirty-seven examples of "the linguistic characteristics of the Evangelist Matthew" which are to be found in the eight verses of this "Interpretation," J. Jeremias states that "it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the interpretation of the Parable of the Tares is the work of Matthew himself."<sup>5</sup> He adds that "this conclusion is confirmed by the Gospel of Thomas which has preserved the parable but not the allegorizing interpretation."

Again, the sayings of Jesus as they are presented to us by Matthew are marked by an exceptionally high amount of *gemara*, by which — to use the words of Professor W. D. Davies — "these *radical* words [of Jesus] begin to take on a *regulatory* character, that is, they became used as guides for the actual business of living, the *point d'appui* for an incipient Christian casuistry."<sup>6</sup> Professor Davies adduces evidence for the same kind of practical adaptation in Mark and in "Q," but indicates that it is much more frequent in "M" — that is, in the material peculiar to Matthew. [He evidently thinks of "M" as a single written source, but for our purposes it makes no difference whether we take this position or look upon it as the deposit of many sources employed by Matthew — or even, in part, composed by him.] For example, in the sermon on the mount, he speaks of the passage 5<sup>22b-24</sup><sup>7</sup> as "a kind of gemaric addition, explanatory of v. 21, 22a,"<sup>8</sup> and suggests that a former member of the Dead Sea sect may have formulated some of it: "the kind of *gemara*

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 81-85.

<sup>6</sup> *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 387 — in the section headed "M and Gemara," to which I am largely indebted for this paragraph.

<sup>7</sup> This is the supplement to the first of the six antitheses; it runs: "Whoever insults his brother shall be liable to judgment, and whoever says 'You fool' shall be liable to the hell of fire." It is followed by the command to seek reconciliation with your brother before offering gifts at the altar of God.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 239.

we find in v. 22b would come very naturally to a person brought up in or influenced by the Dead Sea Sect."<sup>9</sup> From among his many other examples, we may select for mention his treatment of Matt 19 10-12 (the bizarre supplement to the saying which defines remarriage after divorce as adultery).

These words form a bit of Christian *gemara* — an explanatory addition or comment. They cannot be said to arise naturally out of the content of xix.2-9. . . . Pertinent to our purpose is the attempt made in Matthew to come to terms with the actuality of marriage: the material from M in xix.10-12 reflects the same kind of concern, to make the ethic of Jesus practicable, as we find in Paul. Radicalism is tempered to the generality.<sup>10</sup>

It is true that Davies raises the question — in apparent seriousness — of whether such *gemara* goes back to Jesus himself. But he notes nonetheless that Paul still distinguishes carefully between what he has as a "word of the Lord" and what he gives as his own opinion, for which he thinks that he has the Spirit of God (I Cor 7 12, 25, 40), whereas in the gospels, and with particular frequency in Matthew, similar regulatory applications of the absolute demands of Jesus are ascribed to Jesus directly. I do not think we need hesitate to attribute all this *gemara* to the apostolic church, in its efforts to find guidance for its own living in the teachings of Jesus; and the greater frequency with which it occurs in Matthew is most naturally understood if we regard the evangelist himself as the framer of the regulatory adaptation, at least in a fair proportion of the cases. It makes little difference to the main point — whether it were he or those who worked before him. The tradition as he presents it reflects this type of development.<sup>11</sup>

It would appear from all this that we cannot employ the Gospel according to St. Matthew directly as a source of historical knowledge concerning Jesus of Nazareth, either for the events of his life or for the

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 393, 395.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the remarks of T. W. Manson, in the posthumous work, *Ethics and the Gospel*, ch. 6, "The Original Teaching of Jesus and the Ethics of the Early Church," pp. 92 ff. He speaks of the "standing temptation for the Christian community to become a 'saved Remnant' rather than a 'saving Remnant,' . . . and so to make the words and deeds of Jesus the standard and pattern of their internal discipline rather than the inspiration of an apostolic mission." But he finds a good side to this. "If the primitive Church tended to keep Jesus to itself, at least it did take him seriously. One of the ways it did so was by turning his teaching inward upon itself. . . . They saw themselves as the messianic community, and the words of Jesus their Master as full of instruction for them. They were prepared to take his sayings and apply them to their own case, and if in the process sayings which had originally been intended to serve other purposes were diverted, that did not seem to them to be a serious matter." It is not a very long step farther to attribute to Jesus sayings which express what the church now believed to be his mind and will in respect to emergent situations.

substance of his teaching. The tradition, at the stage which it had reached when it came into his hands, had undergone manifold changes; and in his hands it was changed still more. At the heart of it there was the deposit of an early tradition which was passed on to his church or region from the original eyewitnesses and hearers of Jesus; but this deposit had been both diminished in the long process of oral tradition, and enlarged by the admission of new elements. In both respects, the evangelist has contributed to the reshaping of it. By his own selection, he has reduced the amount of accumulated tradition to that which he considered it necessary or desirable to transmit; and in the exercise of his own literary and religious gifts — the particular *charismata* of the Spirit which were given to him — he has introduced into it elements of his own composition. Above all, by his arrangement of his materials, by his supplying of new contexts for sayings and by his addition of comments by way of introductions and generalizing conclusions, he has, as it were, transposed it into a totally different key. He has transformed teaching directed to the Jewish people of Galilee and Jerusalem and their leaders into instructions laid down by the Messiah of Israel, now exalted to be the Lord of the universal church, for the direction of the community of believers. In the words of the late T. W. Manson,

We must realize that the five great discourses of Matthew, of which the Sermon on the Mount is the first, are not shorthand reports of actual addresses delivered by the Prophet of Nazareth on specified dates at specified places. They are systematic presentations of the mind of Christ on various matters of great moment to his Church.<sup>12</sup>

Thirty-three years ago, Professor R. H. Lightfoot closed his Bampton Lectures on *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* with the words:

It seems, then, that the form of the earthly no less than of the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us. For all the inestimable value of the gospels, they yield us little more than a whisper of his voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his ways.

This echo of the words of Job went for the most part unrecognized, and a storm of protest broke over the theological scene in England, where Wrede had never been taken seriously and form criticism had scarcely been noticed. In 1967, would the same words evoke indignation or would they pass unnoticed in a generation that talks nonsense about the Death of God?

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 40.