

First man: I think it was “Blessed are the cheesemakers.”

Woman: What’s so special about cheesemaker?

Second Man: Well obviously it’s not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturer of dairy products.

(from “Monty Python’s Life of Brian.”)

In the film “Monty Python’s Life of Brian” there is a scene in which Brian is present at the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is in the process of delivering the Beatitudes, but Brian on the outskirts of the crowd gets only commentary upon what the crowd near him has misheard or misunderstood. Approaching the Sermon via its setting in Matthew’s gospel is a similar experience. Any enquiry into the Sermon on the Mount as “Evangelion” must take due regard of what Matthew thinks the Good News is, and how this has affected his use of the sayings material within his version of the Sermon. Units within the Sermon have a basis within Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and the Q sermon as far as it can be reconstructed with recourse to Lukan parallels, has its own flavour of “Evangelion”, but with Matthew’s treatment of the material it becomes transformed into essentially a parenetic collection. This transformation of the understanding of the discourses can be understood as part of the move from to the more legalistic formulations of the early Church.

This Sermon was not delivered as a single discourse by Jesus. Its composite nature is clear with units within the Sermon both incompatible with each other and addressed to different audiences, some to disciples, and some to the “crowd”. Once such a conclusion is reached the material can be looked at from several different perspectives depending on the stage of tradition with which you are concerned. To explore the Sermon on the Mount as Gospel, I will firstly look at some individual units within the Sermon which have been with a deal of confidence traced to Jesus.

“Evangelion” as seen within the Q sermon and the particular concerns of that community will then be addressed. Finally, Matthew’s attempt to honour the tradition of this sayings material within the framework of his concept of the Good News by creating a collection of material, in essence for teaching members of the young church, will also be canvassed. All biblical quotations are from the Jerusalem Bible.

These few chapters of Matthew's gospel are replete with familiar Jesus material including the Beatitudes, the Antitheses, and the Lord's Prayer. The way these originally individual traditions were put together reveals a definite plan. Structurally the Sermon is framed by an introduction (4:23-5:2) and a conclusion (7:28-8:1). In outline the Sermon on the Mount consists of:

Beatitudes (5:3-12)

Core of Sermon

Summary – Salt and Light (5:13-16)

Jesus and Torah (5:17-48)

The Christian Cult (6:1-18)

Social Issues (6:19-7:12)

Warnings (7:13-27) (after Allison 437-8)

The parallel Lukan Sermon on the Plain has:

Beatitudes and Woes (6:20-26)

Golden Rule and Law (6:27-36)

Social Issues (6:37-42)

Warnings (6:43-49)

The Beatitude as a literary unit occurs in Wisdom literature and prophetic apocalyptic literature. (Guelich 416-7, The Matthean Beatitudes) In the Beatitudes in the Sermon, Meier says “wisdom ran into apocalyptic” (282), showing signs of both lineages, but it must be said that the result is quite distinguishable from both because of the unique summons of Jesus. (Guelich 433-3 The Matthean Beatitudes) Even if Jesus' original sayings are without the overt apocalyptic emphases of Q, the Beatitudes turned traditional wisdom formulations on their head under the influence of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

The Beatitudes proclaiming the blessedness of the poor, hungry and mourning, because of their simplicity, similarity and separate attestation in Luke are very likely early tradition, probably deriving from Jesus. These are blessings which make no sense apart from an eschatological setting. These blessings are presented as works of God not man, and are part of the Kingship of God which Jesus announced. (Lambrecht 56-7)

The standard proclaimed in the Antitheses by Jesus is, at face value, impossible to follow, and worse rather alien to any reasonable conception of justice. (Cahill 144) The sayings certainly fulfil the criteria of being difficult sayings, some parallels of the material are attested in Mark and Luke, and again may well have gone back to Jesus. The form of the sayings is unique to Jesus material with at least those concerning murder, adultery and oaths likely to have been in the antithetical originally. ((Jeremias 251, New Testament Theology) In substance they take the Torah and deepen the obligation well beyond rabbinic thought. (Banks 188) The new righteousness extolled by the “You have learnt how it was said” sayings are:

where Jesus’ message of the approach of the Kingdom of heaven and his preaching of the will of God become completely one. (Bornkamm 108)

The announcement of the Kingdom of God by Jesus is the context in which demands of a greater righteousness are made and Jesus’ words do not have the intent of codified laws for Christian living. The fact that obedience to God could be measured and formalised is the aspect of Jewish thought against which Jesus makes his demand, as he “wholly separated obedience from legalism.” (Bultmann 92)

The prayer given by Jesus to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount is in the form of a Kaddish prayer. (Perrin 482) The entire prayer has an eschatological basis asking for the coming of the kingdom and the following of the will of God. The forgiving of debtors is a continuation of the demands found in the Antitheses, and even the petition for bread has the connotations of an eschatological feast. (Jeremias 200-1, New Testament Theology)

While the prayer as found in Matthew has been formalised with a doxology and is presented as a response to a call to teach how to pray, the core tradition is very early, containing the Good News of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and can in that sense be seen as “Evangelion”.

The asking/seeking/knocking saying (7:7-8) is a promise. It comes from Q and is separately attested to by the probable use of the same tradition in John. (16:24) What is promised is not spelled out by the saying in Matthew, apart from being “good gifts”. (7:11) A further parallel in the Gospel of Thomas suggests the seeker “will rule over the All.” (Logion 2) It is more likely that in the original context it is entry into the Kingdom of Heaven that is indicated, the knocking and opening motifs suggesting entering the Kingdom as in 5:20, and the seeking motif the seeking of the Kingdom in 6:33. (Fenton 110)

If the Golden Rule was claimed to be the “Law and Prophets,” then the saying following it concerning the two ways (7:13-14) summarises both the promise and the warning of the message of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. The difficulty of the commitment as outlined in the lifestyle demanded in the Antitheses is exemplified by the “narrow gate” as is the hard life of the “blessed” in the Beatitudes. Just as the Golden Rule has a traditional Jewish origin (Lambrecht 180), this idea is a traditional Jewish one echoing Deuteronomy 30:19 and Jeremiah 21:8 and has been given a specific new meaning within the concept of entering the Kingdom of God.

From the sayings of Jesus to the Q Sermon is likely to be only about twenty years. The sayings have by this stage of transmission already been collected into the form of a short discourse, “roughly similar to the Lukan Sermon ... (without the woes, the blind leader, and the master and the disciples).” (Lambrecht 39) It is possible that the collection of sayings in this form recalls a tradition of Jesus giving a memorable sermon but there is no need to follow Lambrecht’s suggestion that such a sermon’s contents resembled those of the Q sermon. (40)

“Evangelion” in Q remains concerned with the approach of the Kingdom of God. It also emphasised overt apocalyptic thought over the more sapiential part of the matrix, including the expectation of the coming Son of Man which goes well beyond the announcement of the Kingdom of God. (Koester 148) The kerygma of the Q community while having apocalyptic elements like those found in Markan and Pauline groups, did not necessarily share their ideas on Jesus’ death and resurrection (Kloppenborg 6) Without the concern of the passion as seen in these parallel traditions, what they preserved of what Jesus said remains the focus of the Gospel for the Q community.

It is possible that the drift towards a traditional Jewish apocalyptic is visible in the Q material in the Sermon. The flood of Matt 7:24, the day of judgment (7:22) and the urgency to be reconciled (5:24) can be classified as crisis sayings which imply an apocalyptic viewpoint. (Jeremias 25, The Sermon on the Mount)

Even if in Matthew, as opposed to Mark, the passion narrative “no longer determines the whole conception of the writing” (Koester 172), it still remains the climax of Matthew’s Gospel.

(Kingsbury 132-3) His use of the sayings material found in the Q source does not alter the fact that it is now what Jesus does in his crucifixion and resurrection which has soteriological significance. In addition, Matthew has been described as the most “Churchly” of the gospels, being both “shaped by the Church’s thought” and “designed for its use.” (Lischer 158) This means that the evangelical nature of the sayings collected in the Sermon on the Mount became subservient to the passion driven kerygma of Matthew and the early Church, and was moulded accordingly.

Matthew revises the Q sermon and inserts it into the Gospel form he has inherited from Mark, at the outset of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. (Donaldson 111) It forms a section of words of Jesus which is followed by a unit of Jesus’s deed. (Jeremias 14, The Sermon on the Mount) In expanding the Q Sermon, Matthew has incorporated other Q sayings from outside the original sermon, for example, the Lord’s Prayer, laying up treasures in heaven (Matt 6:19-21), the eye is the lamp of the body (6:25-34) and the two ways. (7:13-14) He also used his own source, as in the matching “and when you pray...” (6:5) and “and when you fast...” (6:16) sayings.

Where it is possible to see Matthean redaction at work, the tendency is to move from the external specifics to the more generalised ethical teaching. He changes the “poor” to the “poor in spirit” (5:3) internalising the sentiment of the beatitude. (Lambrecht 63) Similarly, Matthew adds “thirst for what is right” (5:6) to the simpler concern of “hunger” preserved in Luke.

The effect of the compilation and redaction is to build a catalogue of instruction on how to live like a Christian. This has been likened by Jeremias to a catechism for either pre-baptismal or newly baptised Jewish Christians. (23, The Sermon on the Mount) He theorises that the Sermon was preceded by the Gospel as well as containing Gospel (31, The Sermon on the Mount), but to

say the collection is Gospel reaches beyond the text as it is in Matthew to the earlier stages of tradition.

As a catechism, the demands of the Sermon on the Mount are rather fearsome, turning the other cheek and loving enemies being difficult enough concepts for mature believers, and quite a burden for putative baptismal candidates. As teaching material it has been otherwise categorised as “a guide to pastoral care for those who are endeavouring to live in God’s new congregation.” (Lischler 159) This view does a great deal more justice to the arduousness of the demands in Matthew’s little collection of Jesus sayings.

Further insight into the instructional nature of the composition comes from Betz’s work on comparisons with writings outside Jewish or Christian literature. He finds a counterpart from Epicurean circles, the “Kyriai Doxai”, which has the form of an epitome. (296) This form of document was meant for students of a philosophy, not beginners nor outsiders, where it epitomised the larger body of thought not always available to the student. (295) When applied to this Sermon, it suggests that this then is a theological handbook for the disciples of Jesus, allowing them to apply the style of thought of their master to new situations. The use of Hellenistic analogues of the Sermon is at least as valid as those which would compare it with later devotional material created by the Church. It also gives a different slant on the reason for the collection of the sayings material, and an insight that the changes from purely Gospel material of Jesus to the more formalised constructs of Matthew need not have been a restrictive one.

The move to an instructional mode for the collected sayings of Jesus does suggest however that they might also have been thought of as law, the so called “nova lex” (Banks 232) at the time of the compilation of the aphorisms. There is inserted the saying:

Do not imagine I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish but to complete them. I tell you solemnly, till heaven and earth disappear,

not one dot, not one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law until its purpose is achieved. (5:17-18)

This saying is unlikely to have been one sourced from Jesus, as not only is it directly in conflict with the spirit and letter of parts of the Antitheses which follow it (Bornkamm 107), and with his rejection of the righteousness of “the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20) but also makes the whole Jesus story incongruous in that it removes the major part of the Jewish objection to Jesus. The situation for the writer of these words seems to be opposing abuse of freedom from the Law, which is a fitting task for the compiler of an instructional work for Church members, but a totally different thought world to that which produced the original sayings. For Matthew, Jesus has fulfilled the law through his crucifixion, whereas the sayings come from a milieu in which the passion is at least not needed and perhaps alien. For Matthew the Law was needed to prevent chaos and keep order – for Jesus the Law has been transcended.

While Matthew implied a respect for Law which would be foreign to Pauline Christianity, for example, and changed the essentially gospel sayings into teaching material, he did not himself in his Gospel attempt to create a new Law. Parallels to the Pentateuch in the structure of Matthew and the mountain setting of the Sermon have been suggested as evidence that the author saw his Gospel as carrying the new Law. (Kingsley 132) However, Donaldson’s study of the mountain motif in Matthew suggested that the parallel is less with Sinai than with Mount Zion, the “city built on a hilltop” (5:14) being the eschatological Jerusalem. (117) In any case it appears that the mountain setting may just be another instance of the author’s talent for picking a good spot in Mark (ie 3:13), to insert discourse material. (Banks 231)

The early Church as it got further from the time of Christ interpreted the Sermon as literal instruction. If Matthew’s author was close enough to Jesus to understand the setting of the demands, his later readers were not. If he intended the Sermon to be an epitome which would allow creative use of Jesus way of thinking, it had the opposite effect, with the words taken as to

be obeyed in a very literal sense. (Grant 126) Turning the collection of sayings, from what are obviously widely different contexts in Jesus' teaching, into an epitome of Jesus material had the effect of separating the demands from the setting. (Davies 433) This made them quite suitable for use by a church which progressively lost its eschatological flavour, and later for the two level Christianity of the post-Constantine world. (Guelich 118, *Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount*)

The context of the original sayings and their tortuous path through multiple redactions to the final form have left varying shades of emphasis which have been used to describe the piece as law, ethics (interim or otherwise), catechism, proclamation, theology, wisdom, apocalyptic, preaching, teaching and even “Evangelion”. Its use to justify everything from pacifism to revolution since it was recorded twenty centuries ago colour its exposition and yet its very familiarity can also anaesthetise the reader so that “no-one notices that Jesus the revolutionary is heaving a verbal grenade into our homiletic garden.” (Meier 281)

However, the document in Matthew called the Sermon on the Mount was designed not as Gospel but as learning material. It contains sayings which derived from the kerygma proclaimed by Jesus and pre-Matthean Christians and so is made of the stuff of their Gospel. Under the influence of the passion narrative and the understanding it lent to the Church, it was inevitable that they would become misrepresented by Matthew’s separation of the demands Jesus made from the kerygma Jesus preached. Like Brian, we rely on what others who heard those who heard Jesus can tell us about his teaching on a mountain. With the understanding that the different levels of tradition suggest, it may be possible to determine who will join the “makers of dairy products” in the Kingdom of Heaven.

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