

The history of the Jesus tradition

Sermon at the chapel at Churchill College

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Lev 2.11-13

Mat 5. 13-16

N.B. this refers to the document 'Analysis of Mt 5', an image of which is pasted at the end of this document.

"For everyone shall be salted with fire."

I am going to explore the Jesus tradition in the first three gospels. I am asking, "How much goes back to the historical Jesus, and how that tradition developed up to the time the gospels were written and afterwards?"

The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke – and, by the way, I shall use these names for the final writers of each gospel without presuming that these were their names or who they were – the first three gospels have much in common. They are often termed the Synoptic Gospels in recognition of this. Why are they so similar and how have the differences come about?

Detailed analysis last century led to a two-source hypothesis. While some disagree, the vast majority of scholars accept this hypothesis and, certainly, I am convinced. Simplified, when Matthew and Luke sat down to write their gospels they had two earlier documents in front of them, from which they copied. One of these was Mark's gospel; the other a hypothetical document termed Q. Unlike the other gospels, Q had no narrative, only sayings and parables attributed to Jesus.

The main tool to investigate all this is to put the three gospels in parallel and I have produced a small example in the handout. This is based on just four verses from Matthew, chapter 5, verses 13 to 16. To the right of these verses are parallels from Mark and Luke, together with parallels from an apocryphal gospel, that of Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas exists only as fragments of two papyri in the original Greek and a whole text in Coptic. The origin of Thomas is debated: it may be from late in the first century (after the synoptic gospels, but not long after) or late in the second century. Some think it contains sayings from Jesus that are independent of the synoptic tradition; others that the author largely copied from the synoptics.

If you glance at the lines that I have numbered 5 and 7 you will notice that the wording is very similar, even across all five columns in the case of line 7. In line 7 I have put two Lukan columns, one for where he has copied from Mark (column 3) and one where he copied from Q (column 4). We know that column 3 is from Mark because it comes in the same place in the narrative, just after Jesus has told the Parable of the Sower and its interpretation, and because Luke has copied both verses 21 and 22 and adapted verse 23 of Mark. The duplicate in column 4 must therefore come from Q (of course, I am simplifying here). However, his use of Mark has been influenced by Q, in that he has added a clause about who sees the light. I shall come back to explanations for some of these differences later.

So, next we ask, “Where did Mark and Q get their material from?” The first disciples and other followers of Jesus in Palestine would have rehearsed sayings and events they remembered. From these beginnings, the oral traditions about Jesus developed. The sayings were used by the early Christians in different circumstances, and the sayings were adapted and explicated. Some remained isolated, but others were gathered together, perhaps into short documents or into memorable sequences of sayings. These then formed the basic resources of Mark and Q and, indeed, for the supplementary material that Matthew and Luke also added to their gospels. Often these catenas of sayings were held together, not by a string of logical connections but by a series of catchwords that they shared. Sometimes the same word was the catchword across the string of sayings, sometimes a new catchword would be picked up from the end of one saying to make a fresh link to the next saying. There is a long series of sayings like this in Mark 9 that ends with the salt sayings (labelled 2 on the sheet). The series of three sayings in Mark 4 are a short example: it begins with light, then the catch-thought is hiddenness, and then about hearing secrets. In Luke 11 in line 7 the sequence of four sayings from verse 33 to 36 is linked by the word ‘light’.

We can gain an insight into the changes that may have happened to sayings from the time they were uttered by Jesus of Nazareth to the point they arrived in the written gospels by looking at the way the gospel writers handled the material. It is especially insightful to look at how Matthew and Luke handled the material in Mark and Q, and the further changes wrought by Thomas adds to this understanding.

Perhaps the most important thing to notice is that each saying is relatively detachable and can be moved from one setting to another. Matthew has taken the salt and light sayings from different sources and strung them together, while also omitting two out of the three salt sayings in Mark and three out of the four sayings that Luke has taken from Q. He also inserted into the string the saying about the city set on a hill (line 8). Thomas places that saying at verse 32, then begins verse 33 with a saying used by Matthew and Luke elsewhere (see 6), and finally returns in 33b to the lamp under the bushel. As a saying on its own is rather gnomic, it gains much of its meaning by its application and this is revealed by the context into which it is applied. This suggests that even if a saying

goes back to Jesus, we can only guess how he used it and in what context, and so what he might have meant by it. We can, however, have a better stab at interpreting what the gospel writers meant by it through the context of where they have placed it.

Often we are assisted in this by additions they, or their predecessors, have made to a saying, most commonly by adding a prefix or suffix. A preface provides a context and a suffix offers an application. The saying about the candle and bushel is given an application in Mark: the original saying might seem to be about letting lights shine, but the application is a warning – anything you might hope to keep secret will have its bushel taken off and everyone will see it. It is then followed by a standard warning that is found frequently in the synoptics and Thomas. Luke, however, appends the standard warning, interpreting the saying much more threateningly. For the salt saying, Mark provides an application by tagging on the moralism to have peace with one another.

Matthew provides prefixes, saying that the hearers are salt and light to the world. These are a little like mini-chapter-headings. They introduce each topic and steer the interpretations of the sayings that follow. He also ends the sequence with his application – his followers should shine before men. This, then, introduces the ethical instructions that follow in the Sermon on the Mount. The evidence that these are Matthean is not just how they function in his discourse but also that these sentences are full of vocabulary that Matthew frequently uses but which is rare in Mark and Luke.

The wording of the saying can also be changed, but usually quite subtly. Matthew and Luke both improve Mark's Greek style, for instance. Sometimes the change may be more pointed. Q had a suffix that implied the light saying was about enlightening people. Luke writes that these are people coming into the house (perhaps thinking of a Christian community), but Matthew is keen to stress that Christianity is for everyone and so the light is given to ALL. Thomas also sees that the light should be shared and writes that it is for those coming out, although this makes no sense of the imagery of a light within a house.

Sometimes, perhaps like Chinese whispers, a saying seems to have ended up with no meaning at all. The first of the Markan sayings on salt (see 2) is like this, "Salted with fire" is very mysterious. Matthew and Luke both deal with it by just omitting it. Interestingly, we can follow the later trajectory of this saying in the handwritten copies of Mark. As someone was writing out this sentence they decided it must mean something and that scripture would provide the meaning. So they added some words from Leviticus about salting a sacrifice before burning it with fire. Later copyists dropped the original saying entirely, just leaving the text from Leviticus.

I find all this detective work, tracing the antecedents of our gospel texts, fascinating. Yet, if one was being provocative, one might ask, "With all this mucking about of the Jesus tradition, does anything come from the man himself?" An attempt at an answer was provided in developing what are termed Criteria of Authenticity. The idea was that

one could sift sayings with these criteria and come up with a set that probably went back to Jesus, 'dominical sayings'. It was never claimed that this was anything more than probability and judgement. And there is always the temptation to discover a Jesus in one's own likeness, who said just what one would want him to have said. Partly for these reasons, but also, I feel, because of the ideologically secularist assumptions of modern academia, the Criteria have fallen out of academic fashion. Not sharing that assumption, I consider that the Criteria have some value if used cautiously.

Now is not the moment to review all the Criteria, but some are closely related to what I have been describing. One is multiple attestation. If a saying is transmitted by both Mark and Q it must be at least early. Another criterion is a plausible reconstructed transmission history that shows how less original forms could be derived from more original ones – reconstructed using the patterns of change illustrated in my analysis of Matthew 5 and its parallels. Thirdly, the criteria of embarrassment and uniqueness might be applied in our case to the saying about salted with fire as it was retained despite it no longer making sense to people. That saying also has some historical plausibility and coherence. The historical Jesus was certainly executed and some notion of being ready for acute persecution would fit his context. However, providing a putative context for sayings has to be largely guesswork.

In recent decades, scholarly attention has shifted to the study of the texts as they have come down to us. This secular move happens to coincide with a conservative theological mood that takes the text of the New Testament as-is as the authoritative Word revealed by God. These moves allow biblical scholars to apply to a gospel a range of contemporary critical approaches such as narrative criticism, feminist criticism or post-colonial studies. In doing this, much attention is directed to the placement of sayings and narratives within a gospel's structure, assuming that the gospel writers composed their books with care over these matters or, maybe, the placements reveal their subconscious presuppositions about meanings. At the very least, the sequence of sayings in their books does provide an actual context as an interpretive frame for the reader. Even so, the varied readings are no less disparate than the results of the old criteria of authenticity, and they are no less vulnerable of coming up with interpretations that suit the personalities and ideologies of those using these methods.

However, I don't think we have to end on such an uncertain note. If we take the candle under a bushel saying, for instance, Mark sets it just after the Parable of the Sower as part of his explanation of why Jesus was not recognised as the messiah in his own lifetime. Such a meaning is necessarily anachronistic on the lips of the historical Jesus. Matthew and Luke's use of Q both focus on the importance of letting one's light shine, which Jesus may have meant, but it is a truism. Yet all of them retain an element of threat or challenge around standing firm in one's witness to truth. Salt that has lost its saltiness is cast out; nothing can be kept secret; be bold in proclaiming the light; and everyone shall be salted with fire. Whether this goes back to Jesus or not, and I strongly

suspect it does; there is a commonality in the message: Stand firm in persecution. Whether I am right or not in my historical reconstruction, and what I am about to say may vitiate that, it does seem to me to be a crucial message for our own day. We are experiencing Western societies hurtling towards a lauding of selfishness, including a desire to repress critical voices. This is an understanding of the human condition which is the very antithesis of the Jesus tradition. Be ready then, for everyone shall be salted with fire.

Mt 5 THE BEATITUDES; TO CROWD 1 ¹³ Ye are the salt of the earth:	Mk AVOIDING THE FIRES OF HELL; TO DISC 9 ⁴⁹ For every one shall be salted with fire, [and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. <i>In ACDOΨ Vulg Steph; omit in ALEPHBLWA</i>]	2 Lk from Q 4 COST OF DISCIPLESHIP; TO CROWD	Lev (LXX) 3 ² ¹² and every gift of your sacrifice shall be salted with salt	<i>Compare below</i> Mt 10.27 What I tell you in darkness, <i>that</i> speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, <i>that</i> preach ye upon the housetops. [& similar in Lk 12.3 below left]
but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. ¹⁴ Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.	⁵⁰ Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? ^{50 cont} Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another. 8 DEPARTS	14 ³⁴ Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? ³⁵ It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dung-hill; <i>but</i> men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. PARABLES OF LOST SHEEP, COIN, SON	5 Thos 22 He that hath ears, let him hear. Jn 8 ¹² I am the light of the world: Lk from Q	6 Thomas 33 Jesus said: What thou shalt hear in thine ear, proclaim to the other ear on your roof-tops. 77 Jesus said: I am the light that is over them all. 32 A city that is built on a high mountain and fortified cannot fall, nor can it remain hidden.
7 ¹⁵ Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a lamp-stand; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. 9 ¹⁶ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. THE MORAL INJUNCTIONS OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT	Mk PARABLE OF SOWER; TO DISCIPLES 4 ²¹ And he said unto them, Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed? and not to be set on a lamp-stand ²² For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad. ²³ If any man have ears to hear, let him hear. MORE PARABLES	Lk from Mk PARABLE OF THE SOWER; ? TO CROWD 8 ¹⁶ No man, when he hath lighted a candle, covereth it with a vessel, or putteth it under a bed; but setteth it on a lamp-stand, that they which enter in may see the light. ¹⁷ For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither <i>any</i> thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad. ¹⁸ Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have. CRITICISES HIS FAMILY FOR NOT HEARING & DOING	CONDEMNATION OF THIS GENERATION; TO CROWD 11 ³³ No man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth it in a secret place, neither under a bushel, but on a lamp-stand, that they which come in may see the light. ³⁴ The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness. ³⁵ Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness. ³⁶ If thy whole body therefore be full of light, having no part dark, the whole shall be full of light, as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light. ... 12 ² For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. ³ Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops. DENOUNCES LAWYERS OVER RULES	^{33 cont} For no man lights a lamp and sets it under a bushel, nor does he put it in a hidden place; but he sets it upon the lamp-stand, that all who go in and come out may see its light. 24 There is a light within a man of light, and it gives light to the whole world. If it does not give light, there is darkness.

NT translation Authorised (King James) Version (modified). LXX from New English Translation of the Septuagint. Thomas from The Gospel of Thomas: carm.org