Introduction: Text Philology

The Large Picture. Growth texts are common in ancient traditions, from court chronicles (where the need to keep up with the latest eclipse is obvious) to the school texts of the philosophers (where the need to deal with the latest idea or objection is equally obvious). The gigantic Mahâbhârata obviously did not write itself in one weekend. It was extended by the incorporation of new incidents agreeable to its warrior listeners, and was transformed and further extended when it was taken over by the priestly caste. Similarly, a question about the young and poor Confucius (“Why does he have all these special skills?”) gets a stumbling and embarrassed answer in Analects 9:6, but a grandiose and confident answer when repeated (“What regular teacher did he have?”) more than a century later in Analects 19:22. The Mencian theory of 500-year cycles in history gets a confident statement in Mencius 2B13, when it was hoped that Mencius would be recognized as the coming sage, and a rueful restatement in Mencius 7B38, the very last passage in the book, when it was realized that this had not taken place, and that the hope based on that theory had failed. The Gortyn law code of Crete, even though carved into the stone walls of the hearing chamber, was twice extended, the second time in a different hand. The law too, and above all the law, must expand with the cases brought before it, and with the new issues of inheritance or land tenure which they raise, or it will die.

All humanistic fields accordingly possess the concept of the growth text. But they tend to restrict its application to marginal texts, leaving the central texts culturally or theologically protected. Harold Attridge did a fine study of the Acts of Thomas, noting that several passages, including the famous Hymn of the Pearl, are later additions. The approach, however, has been off limits for such texts as the Synoptic Gospels.

I here transgress that limit. It exists, I imagine, to avoid the idea that concepts of Jesus, and of salvation, evolved in the early church. The benefit of allowing the exploration of that idea is that Mark and other texts become, for the first time, available as evidence for the development of Christianity in its formative years. As so often happens, history and theology are here opposed. I would reconcile them by noting that theology itself has a history. Truth may indeed be permanent, but the human understanding of truth can be gradual. It is a few incidents in that process, as reflected in the Gospel of Mark, that I plan to explore in what follows.

It is obvious that there are similarities between certain passages in Mark, just as there are formulas, repeated lines or groups of lines, in Homer. What makes it possible to say that one occurrence is later than another? One way is if one of two occurrences is an interruption, and thus presumably an insertion, in its context. It is also suggestive if one of the two is merely less at home in one context than it is in the other, the latter being presumably the later. Before proceeding with Mark, I will first illustrate both types from Homer.
**Interruption.** The Iliad has a lot of military problems. For one thing, it knows the chariot only as an archaeological object, and not as a weapon. In the Iliad, warriors do not fight from chariots, they *get down out of them* to fight. The ancient Near Eastern chariot archers would have laughed themselves silly. But of all the Iliad’s military idiocies, the worst is Id 2:53-444, an interruption in the march of the Greeks on Troy. Zeus has sent Agamemnon a lying dream, promising him victory. He calls the army to assemble. But before setting out, he proposes to test the army by offering to return home instead. There follows a rush for the ships, which the leaders labor to prevent. An assembly ensues, at which the commoner Thersites is abused for presuming to speak; he is beaten by Odysseus until he sobs. At last the army gathers, and they set out. The lines describing the setting out in 2:50-52 are the same as those describing the setting out in 2:442-444. This sort of duplication is common at the margins of an interpolation, as William Walker has shown for the editorial interpolations in Paul’s letters. The comic tone of 53-444 is another argument for its extraneous quality. A confirming point is Odysseus’ referring to himself as the father of Telemachus, at 2:260. If we see this incident as taking place in the tenth year of the war, then Telemachus, back in Ithaka, is a kid of ten, nobody on whom to base the reputation of a warrior. That phrase could only have been written by someone aware of the way Telemachus is built up in the last layers of the Odyssey, from a wimp to a mighty warrior, who kills several of the armed and militarily trained suitors with his spear. Then this patch of the Iliad is not only late, it is not even Odyssean, it is *post*-Odyssean. The incongruity of Odysseus’ self-reference confirms its interpolated status, which its interruptive quality had separately suggested.

**Directionality.** Of two related passages, we ask, which is aware of the other? In Odyssey 5:159-170, Calypso offers to send Odysseus home, and he refuses unless she swear an oath that she intends him no other (*ἄλλο*) harm. That demand is made in 5:177-179. In Odyssey 10:333-335, Circe invites Odysseus into bed with her, and he refuses, in almost exactly the same words, unless she swear that she intends him no other (*ἄλλο*) harm. Now in the Iliad, there are many repeating expressions, literary clichés, such as diners putting their hands to the good things before them. They are part of the Homeric language, they are narratively and sometimes metrically convenient. But these three lines demanding an oath of a goddess are not likely to have been invented by the bards of old, and handed down in the poetic vocabulary until a need for them arose. They are too specific. They are instead a case of literary borrowing, and we would like to know the direction of the borrowing. Two facts help us decide. First, Odysseus is in genuine peril from Circe, who has just tried to turn him into a pig, and he has reason to ask for a guarantee before putting down his sword and going to bed with her. Calypso, on the other hand, has done him no harm, and he has been uneventfully sleeping with her for seven years. To what first harm can the “other harm” of our passage refer? It has a referent in the pig attempt of Circe, and only there. The Calypso instance is therefore secondary. It is a literary imitation.

This is how I propose to handle three Markan passages. They are points where a thematic relationship exists, whose status, and whose literary directionality, it would be useful to ascertain.
Examples From Mark

Mark contains material of different ages. It treats the Gentile Mission as both an irrelevance (The Syrophoenician Woman, Mk 7:24-31, where Jesus denies that his preaching is for her benefit) and as an essential (a prerequisite for the Last Days, Mk 13:10). It treats Jesus as a healer (The Leper, Mk 1:40-45) and as God (the forgiving of sins, Mk 2:5-10). Why this mixture? I can think of two scenarios. Either Mark was combined on one occasion, but rather carelessly, from mutually contradictory material, or it was compiled over a period of time, and continually updated itself by adding passages to reflect the latest ideas about Jesus (his increasing divinization) and changes in acceptance of his message (growing popularity among Gentiles). The latter makes more sense. Mark, to judge from this brief preliminary survey, looks like a growth text.

If so, then its earlier layers were available to its later layers as literary sources capable of further development. That is my proposition. It is a proposition which can be tested, and this paper is that test.

Among several instances of such internal thematic development, I will here notice three pairs of passages. In each, I find that the directionality is always from the shorter to the more extended member. In the third, that directionality conclusion is supported by evidence that the longer version is interpolated.

Example 1. The Feeding of Four Thousand

The two feeding miracles have attracted much attention, and invited many explanations. Their symbolic value has not always played a part in those explanations, but I wish to suggest that it is practically the whole point. The symbolism is contained in numbers, and there are so many numbers involved that it would be hard to pick them out (what is the deep meaning of “five thousand” anyway?). But Mark has Jesus decode it for his disciples. In Mk 8:19-21, he juxtaposes the two miracles, in one of which (as he invites them to remember) twelve baskets of leftovers were collected, and in the other, seven baskets. What is the importance of the leftovers? They represent the power of the miracle that extends beyond the time of the miracle; the capacity of Jesus’ message to nourish others. In the first case, the Five Thousand, the twelve baskets symbolize the Twelve Tribes, meaning, All of Israel, not just the few gathered on the Galilean shoreline. In the second, seven baskets symbolize all nations, that is, the world, and not just the Jews. What the story of the Four Thousand adds to the story of the Five Thousand is that we are now dealing not just with a Jewish reform sect, but with a world religion. Naturally the text had to update itself, to take account of that dramatic and unexpected development. The inclusion of Gentiles had to be legitimized as something intended from the very first. This is what the Feeding of Four Thousand does. It identifies the Gentiles as benefactors of Jesus’ teaching and miraculous powers from the very beginning; from Jesus’ own lifetime.
Example 2: The Ambition of Jacob and John

In Mk 9:30-35 we have two accounts of the same event:

9:30. And they went forth from thence, and passed through Galilee, and he would not that any man should know it.

FIRST ACCOUNT: [31] For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of Man is delivered up into the hands of men, and they shall kill him, and when he is killed, after three days he shall rise again. [32] But they understood not the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

9:33a. And they came to Capernaum

SECOND ACCOUNT: [33b] And when he was in the house he asked them, What were ye reasoning on the way? [34] But they held their peace, for they had disputed one with another on the way, who was the greatest. [35] And he sat down, and called the Twelve, and he saith unto them, If any man would be first, he shall be last of all, and a servant of all.

If Jesus himself taught them on the way, he has no need to ask them what they were discussing. Of the two options, it is the second that passes smoothly into what follows in the text of Mark, namely, the bringing of a child as an example of simplicity. Then the first ending, the prediction of Jesus’ death, is not only contradictory, it is interruptive, and likely to be an interpolation. If we take this a step further, by way of checking on that conclusion, we find that all four places in Mark where Jesus predicts his death and resurrection are juxtaposed to passages in which he does not make that prediction. (For details, see my piece on the Resurrection of Jesus in Mark). Here, the second version of the journey (Mk 33b-35) is the earlier.

That earlier version reappears with more detail in the long episode 10:35-44, in which the two Zebedees ask to have the chief places in Jesus’ future Kingdom. Jesus asks if they are prepared to suffer even death. They say they are. He then promises them the supremacy they ask, but with the condition that they have accepted. It is a matter of record (attested both by Luke and Paul) that in the Jerusalem church, Jacob Zebedee was indeed the leading figure, with Peter, in Galilee days the foremost among them, having only a secondary role at Jerusalem. And it was Jacob Zebedee, as leader of the Jerusalem Christians, who issued the radical ruling that Jewish food laws did not apply to Gentile converts, as long as they avoided idol meat, which would imply worship of another god. (For the sorting out of the perennial problem of Jacob Zebedee and Jacob the Lord’s Brother, see my paper Jerusalem and Paul). Against this, the Jerusalem Jewish leadership protested, and Herod Antipas I duly executed Jacob Zebedee. He sought Peter also, as next on the hit list, but Peter escaped. This event would have been a shock to the Christian community at large, and to account for it by a prediction of Jesus would at least have legitimized it as something foreseen. If I am reading the signs right, the execution of the leading Jesus figure in Jerusalem led to the exodus of most of the rest of them (including Mark himself; see my piece on Mark at Perga). All this was a catastrophe, and the need to say something about it, for those following Mark’s Gospel as the leading document of their faith, would have been very great. In meeting that need, it seems that Mark reached back into the earlier parts of his story, for a germ on which to hang this new story; this new prediction.
This example has the further interest that, as a prophecy ex eventu, its terminus a quo is the year 44, the last year of the reign of Herod Antipas I, who executed Jacob. This gives us one firm date within the span over which Mark was composed. That date correlates well with references to Paul in Mark, with the fact (Koester Ancient Christian Gospels, 52f) that much of Paul’s knowledge of Christian tradition seems to come from Mark, and with what Acts tells us about the relation between Mark and Paul: they were contemporaries. Clarification of the nature of Mark thus helps us locate it within the chronology of Christian writings; a chronology in which Mark, or its earliest layers, seems to occupy first place. Its treatment, indeed its rewriting, by both Luke and Matthew are implicit evidence tending in the same direction: Mark for them was an established authority, which could not be ignored, but could at best only be absorbed and extended, by any later person such as Luke or Matthew who proposed to tell the story of Jesus. The kind of position which, on this evidence, Mark seems to have occupied, takes time to establish. We may responsibly posit a gap of about a generation between Mark and the Second Tier Gospels, Luke and Matthew. This gives Mark’s evidence for Jesus a higher historical value than anything in Luke or Matthew that is not simply repeated from Mark. It puts Mark in a class by itself.

Example 3. Faith Healing

In Mk 6:55-56, it is said of some who gathered at Gennesaret, that they knew Jesus,

[6:55] and ran round about that whole region, and began to carry about on their beds those that were sick, where they heard he was. [56] And wheresoever he entered, into villages or into cities, or into the country, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and besought him that they might touch if it were but the border of his garment, and as many as touched him were made whole.

Mk 6:56 is a throwaway line; it is followed in 7:1 by an encounter with Pharisees, who are concerned not with healing, but with handwashing. But the same motif of healing by touching “but the border of his garment” recurs, narratively fleshed out, as ten lines and not as one line, at Mk 5:25-34. This is literally interruptive, it occurs in the course of another story, as Jesus is proceeding to the house of Jairus, where he will bring Jairus’ daughter out of a coma. Here are the joins between the story and the interruption:

5:24a. And he went with them,
5:24b. and a great multitude followed him, and they thronged him
5:25. And a woman, who had an issue of blood twelve years,
5:26. and had suffered many things of many physicians, . .
5:34. . . . And he said unto her, Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace, and be healed of thy plague.
5:35. While he yet spake, they come from the ruler of the synagogue, saying, Thy daughter is dead, why troublest thou the Teacher any further?

What does the interrupting story have, that the other does not? It has greater applicability to the situation of the audience. Jairus’ daughter’s healing was touching, but now Jesus is no longer with us; he cannot come to my house. How can his power of healing affect me? The answer given in the interrupting story is: I can access it through my faith, even if he is not physically present. We do not need Jesus, to be healed by Jesus.
I think it is significant that, when it was desired to add this and similar teachings to his book, Mark did not go to some outside source. In all three cases, he found a precedent within his own previous work, a work which had been read to churches for years, and with which they were already familiar. The new story therefore required the least possible mental adjustment on the part of those who already knew the old story. This shows a sound literary sense on the part of Mark; a sense of how best to manage his new additions.

The Three Examples

The Gospel of Mark was at one point presumably a simple account of the life of Jesus. What do these three passages add to it? I would say that they add three things to the understanding of Mark’s audience: (1) an assurance that their faith is not confined to the narrow Jewish horizon in which the Jesus movement arose, but is universal; (2) an assurance that the story does not end with Jesus; death, but is also aware of future events, and of the time in which they themselves live; and (3) an assurance that the power of Jesus is still available to them. It gives to the original past tense of Mark a permanent present tense; an ongoing relevance.

Retrospect: Homer Once Again

The above has suggested that Mark is not only a growth text, but that in growing, it feeds in part upon itself, rather than annexing material from outside or inventing de novo. This is perhaps a new idea for readers of Mark. To help it seem more familiar, I would like to return to the example of the Homeric poems to show that the same thing can be seen as going on there also.

I have noticed the long digression in Iliad 2, where Agamemnon invites the army to go back home, as a manifest absurdity, and as a clearly late passage. There is a precedent for that thought of giving up and going home, but it occurs in a narratively more reasonable context. This is the discouragement of Agamemnon in Iliad 9, when after many reverses in the war against Troy, he proposes that they should acknowledge that the gods are against them, and accept the inevitable: they are not going to win (9:16-28). He is overruled by the bolder Diomedes, and all prepare to resist the Trojans as best they can, but Agamemnon’s thought of return is perfectly rational at this point. The burlesque of this motif of return in Iliad 2 shows the text making fun of its own previous history, and drawing on elements in that previous history to do so.

Another segment of the Iliad which since ancient times has been thought to be late and indeed extraneous is Iliad 10, the Exploit of Dolon. In this story two heroes, Odysseus and Diomedes, clad in animal skins, go out at night to see if they can learn what the Trojans are planning. That same night, Hector sends Dolon, also clad in an animal skin, to spy on the Greeks. The animal skins are weird in the Iliad, nor is any other exploit of Iliad heroes, whether Greek or Trojan, undertaken at night. And like the Rush for the Ships in Iliad 2, this piece betrays its post-Odyssean date. It does so by equipping Odysseus with a bow, which he never wields in the Iliad. Even on Circe’s isle, he uses a spear to kill a stag to feed his men. Back home, he uses his own bow to slaughter Penelope’s suitors. Not until that moment does the bow become a signature of Odysseus. Not until that moment does the bow-carrying Odysseus in the Tale of Dolon become intelligible.
Is there a germ of this ridiculous Dolon story anywhere else in the Iliad? Yes, in Iliad 11, right next door. In that book, after Agamemnon has given his best against the Trojans and withdrawn from battle with a wound, Odysseus (11:310f) calls to Diomedes to do something to withstand Hector, and *the two of them* begin killing Trojans. This double exploit may well have provided the nucleus for the nocturnal expedition of Odysseus and Diomedes in the spoof exploit that we know as Iliad 10.

It seems that the late Iliad audiences rather fancied a bit of comedy along with the usual bloodbath tales. And when the Iliad, no less mindful than any modern cocktail pianist of whether its story is going over well, turns to pleasing those new audiences, it does not go outside, shopping for new folktales Greek or foreign; it reworks its own material. In this way, the new material, being composed of dimly recognizable elements, seems better integrated into the older material. Its very familiarity adds a certain spice to its repetition. Mere comedy might be discordant, but comedy built out of known material is another matter.

The Iliad is not a sacred text, in the sense that Mark was for a time the authoritative account of the founder of what quickly became a new religion. It is a sacred text in the sense that the Mahâbhârata is a sacred text, one embodying the traditions and, eventually, in the segment known as the Bhagavad-Gita, the most refined ethical reflections, of a whole people. My final suggestion is that texts sacred in either of these ways tend to extend themselves, growing into new versions of themselves, and in part feeding upon themselves, in order to maintain their authority and relevance among those for whom they are composed.

For none of these texts is a literary exercise, written for its author’s amusement. All are responses to the need and situation of an audience – an embattled religious reform sect needing self-definition, as with Mark, or with the other two, of a whole people awaiting an appropriate expression of their most deeply held values, that which binds them, and makes them one.
If I may close with a final word about Mark, it would be to pick up on the thought that Mark is early, and that Mark’s earliest layer may prove to be the earliest extant Christian document. If so, then stratification of Mark is a matter of some urgency. I can here report that this effort has been underway for some time, to the point where two rival reconstructions of Mark are available. See this web page:


The two reconstructions will be discussed at this evening’s open meeting of the Alpha Christianity group. That will take place in this same room, this evening between 8 and 10 PM. Other background matter, including my papers mentioned above, can also be found on this web page. All are warmly invited to attend. Those unable to be there in person may participate in the ongoing discussion by sending comments to:

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Thanks, and best wishes with your own research.

Works Cited

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