

Redaktionsgeschichte and the De-Historicizing of the New Testament Gospel

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Redaktionsgeschichte is a relatively new discipline in Gospel research, based on the premise that the editorial work of the synoptic evangelists served a conscious theological purpose.¹ To the extent that form-critical analysis is assumed to determine the limits of the redactor’s work, *Redaktionsgeschichte* is the child of *Formgeschichte*. But the child is engaged in open rebellion against the parent. Form criticism, with its interest in small units of tradition within the text, traced their development back to earlier stages in the tradition in order to account for their form in terms of the presumed life situation in which they arose. The decisive question was: What is the life situation out of which a given unit of tradition emerged? The “redactors” or “editors” of the Gospels were considered essentially as “collectors” of developed traditions who contributed almost nothing to the formation and shaping of the material. In opposition to this critical reconstruction, the proponents of *Redaktionsgeschichte* consider the evangelist-redactors to be the crucial figures in the formation of the Synoptic Gospels. In the construction of the framework of the gospel and in the use of techniques of style they were guided by a distinctively dogmatic purpose. It is necessary for New Testament research, therefore, to move beyond the formation of individual units of tradition to the form and shaping of the canonical Gospels themselves. In pursuing this quest, *Redaktionsgeschichte* asks as the essential question: What was the life situation out of which a particular Gospel emerged?

The concern of Willi Marxsen is the evangelist Mark who first created the distinctive literary form designated “the Gospel.” His monograph, *Der Evangelist Markus—Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums*, submitted originally to the theological faculty of the University of Kiel as a *Habilitationsschrift*, was published in 1956 and republished in 1959. Marxsen’s basic presupposition is that the well-planned, particular character of the Gospel of Mark—in contrast to the anonymous character of individual passages derived from oral tradition—demands “an individual, an author-personality, who pursues a certain goal throughout his work” (p. 9). The individual impetus exerted in fashion-

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ing the oldest Gospel may be estimated from the fact that, unlike Matthew and Luke, who had Mark’s structured account before them, the first evangelist had at his disposal only a passion narrative, certain collections of material and anonymous individual units of tradition. By transmitting this tradition according to a planned editing, Mark succeeded in structuring, and even restructuring, the tradition in terms of a personal formation. In Gospel research primary consideration must be given to this formation, that is to the tradition as laid down within the totality of the Gospel. Form criticism was oriented toward individual fragments of the

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¹ The three most significant attempts to apply the principles of *Redaktionsgeschichte* to the Synoptic Gospels are (in order of appearance): Hans Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeiten—Studien zur Theologie des Lukas* (1954); Will Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus—Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums* (1956); and Georg Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit—Untersuchungen zur Theologie des Matthäus* (1962).

tradition. What is distinctive of a *redaktionsgeschichtliche* approach is its orientation toward the total-work, in the conviction that the evangelist is himself a creative person (pp. 11f.).

Mark’s own concern in his work, and at the same time his actual accomplishment, is not to be detected primarily from the content, but from the framework of the Gospel, broadly conceived. By “framework” Marxsen means “the itinerary and the connections of the scenes, but also the restructurings in the text, as far as these are discernible” (p. 12). This framework must be examined in order to determine its own life situation. Marxsen insists that it is necessary to distinguish three different levels of life situation: the first level is found in the non-recurring situation of Jesus’ activity; the second is provided by the situation in the church in which units of tradition circulate; the third level relates to the situation of the primitive community in which the Gospels originated. This third level is the particular concern of *Redaktionsgeschichte*, on the assumption that “a literary work is a primary source for the historical situation out of which it arose, and is only a secondary source for the historical details concerning which it gives information.”² Marxsen, therefore, inquires into the situation of the community in which the Gospel came into being—its points of view, its time, and even its composition. This sociological concern, however, is always related to the specific interest and basic concepts of the Gospel-writer himself. Marxsen’s own conviction is that “each community, each period respectively in which the Gospel-writers lived, developed from their problems and for their purposes a very specific ‘form’” (p. 13). The criteria for the determination of the ‘form’ of the works will of necessity be derived more readily from the “framework” than from the incorporated material. In spite of the fact that the three Synoptic Gospels contain extensively similar subject matter, their ‘form’ is actually distinct. This is already suggested by the statements with which each of the Gospel opens: εὐαγγέλιον in Mark 1:1 corresponds to βίβλος in Matt. 1:1 and to διήγεστις in Luke 1:1. While Mark has created the ‘gospel-form’, Matthew intended to produce a chronicle, while Luke’s purpose was to write a life of Jesus (p. 13; cf. pp. 141-47). By observing the development from one to the other it is possible to formulate a very vivid picture of the history of the primitive church.

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In pursuing his research Marxsen uses both the analytical and the constructive approach. He points to “the circular character in which the work of *Redaktionsgeschichte*’ participates.” From (1) the form of the Gospel one can make (2) conclusions about the author and the situation in his community, which in turn provides (3) insight into the form of the Gospel (p. 14). His method is to approach Mark from two points. First, he seeks to go back beyond Mark and to separate the tradition from the final redaction in order to construct a reasonable explanation for the manner in which the Gospel is composed. Then second, he brings into the investigation Matthew and Luke, emphasizing their altered conception in an attempt to come to a clearer understanding of that which is typically Marcan. Matthean and Lucan developments which go beyond Mark find their importance in the conclusions which may be drawn from them for Mark’s distinctive point of view.³

² Rudolf Bultmann, “The New Approach to the Synoptic Problem,” *Journal of Religion* 6 (1926), p. 341 cited by Marxsen, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

³ This two-pronged approach is applied in four studies: the first concerns John the Baptist and the wilderness tradition; the second examines the geographical statements of the Gospel, and especially the references to Galilee; the third concerns itself with Mark’s use of the term εὐαγγέλιον; the fourth considers the speech complex in Mark 13. A final summary correlates the major results of these independent studies.

The conclusions to which Marxsen is led by the application of *Redaktionsgeschichte* to the text of Mark have significance for the larger issue of faith and history in the New Testament. This is evident already in the initial study of the Baptist and the “wilderness” tradition. Marxsen argues that Mark edited his Gospel as a whole, and the larger units within it as well, backwards (p. 17). By that he means that Mark began with the passion narrative, which provided an interpretation for the tradition of Jesus’ teaching and miracles, which in turn gives meaning to the episode of John the Baptist’s appearance in the wilderness. The biblical citation in Mark 1:2f. points the reader back to the Scripture and makes him aware that the beginning of Jesus is to be found in the prehistory of the Old Testament; conversely, with the coming of Jesus the Old Testament becomes authentic prophecy and John becomes the genuine forerunner who announced the Expected One.

Once this principle of editing backwards is recognized it becomes clear that the reflective citation in Mark 1:2f. is intended by the evangelist to serve as a commentary on verses 4-8, which summarize the Baptist’s ministry.⁴ The commentary which Mark selected envisions the forerunner’s appearance in a wilderness locale. Critical analysis of verse 4 leads Marxsen to believe that the Baptist material is essentially of a traditional character, but the insistence that John appeared ἐν τῷ ἔρημῳ (“in the wilderness”) is an editorial interpolation. Since the Septuagintal text of the biblical citation had expressly specified the appearance of the forerunner ἐν τῷ ἔρημῳ, Mark reworked the tradition toward conformity with the prophecy by repeating this particular phrase. By

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doing so he makes it obvious that John, the one who appears there—in the wilderness!—is precisely the one designated by the prophets. Ἐν τῷ ἔρημῳ in verse 4 is actually an Old Testament citation. The term “wilderness” has no geographical significance; it has no bearing on the place where the Baptist ministered. Rather, it qualifies the Baptist as the one who fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. To drive home his point Marxsen formulates it in an overstated fashion: “the Baptist would have been the one who appeared ‘in the wilderness’ even if in all his life he had never been in a desert” (p. 22). Mark did not introduce an inherently geographical designation to evoke a geographical impression, but in order to support a theological construction:⁵ the Baptist belongs to the gospel as the true forerunner announced by the prophets. A purely historical understanding of the wilderness is improper. The evangelist had no real interest in the question whether his assertion was in fact historically accurate; his intention was wholly theological. The de-historicizing of the New Testament Gospel is evident in Marxsen’s summation of Mark’s method:

“Thus the essentially geographical concept ‘wilderness’ is stripped of its geographical content, even as the essentially historical statement [that John appeared in the wilderness] loses its historical content. Both are made to serve a theological declaration. Mark does not utilize his sources so as to append reflections to them (as did Matthew with his Old Testament citation), but instead he interprets his sources through arrangement and grouping” (p. 26).

⁴ According to Marxsen (p. 18, n. 4), this is the sole example of a *Reflexionszitat* in Mark.

⁵ This contention is developed more fully by Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness. The Wilderness Tradition in the Second Gospel* (1963).

A comparative study of the treatment of the Baptist in the wilderness tradition in “the great Gospels” [Matthew and Luke] confirms Marxsen in the opinion that only Mark uses a locality designation as a theologically-laden declaration (pp. 26-31). For Matthew and Luke, the factuality of the recorded material is the essential thing (pp. 29f.). Marxsen sees this emphasis on factuality as a historicizing of the presentation. Mark’s accomplishment consists in the fact that he did not merely collect source fragments and bring them together to make a compilation, but he objectively tied them together by editing his material from the passion narrative backwards. This resulted in a unified presentation, despite the differences in the subject matter treated. Thus in the prologue to Mark, “pre-history” [the Old Testament] and “forerunner” [John] are both incorporated into the gospel (p. 31).

The same de-historicizing tendency in Marxsen’s approach is evident in his treatment of the itinerary of Jesus’ travels in Mark 3:9-8:27. From the summary statement in Mark 1:14 Marxsen concludes that for Mark “the decisive proclamation of the gospel takes place always in Galilee”

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(p. 39). The importance of Galilee to the evangelist is due not to some past event—the past ministry of Jesus and his disciples—but to a far more immediate concern at the time Mark was editing his Gospel. Marxsen questions whether Galilee (as a region) had played any role at all in the tradition of Jesus’ activity available to Mark. Places in and around Galilee were mentioned, but the actual name of the region is first emphasized by the evangelist. For him, Galilee is the place of Jesus’ present activity. Moreover, the Sea of Galilee held a particular significance for the primitive community existing in Mark’s time. From an examination of Mark 14:28 (“But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee”) and ch. 16:7 (“But go, tell his disciples... that he is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you”), Marxsen asserts that the churches of Palestine oriented themselves toward the Sea of Galilee and gathered there in the closing years of the sixties in imminent expectation of the parousia (pp. 54-59). In order to lend support to this movement, Mark located his Jesus-tradition in Galilee. Marxsen writes:

“Thus the historical aspect is at best an indirect reason for his presentation. In contrast to this, the direct motive is a contemporary situation within the community. This situation provides the motivation which causes the gospel writer to set forth Jesus’ activity paradigmatically in Galilee.

“This observation could be stated as follows: the past is seen and structured in terms of the present. The ‘frame’ (Galilee) has contemporary significance.... The interpretation of a literary work must begin with the most recent level, that which brings the incorporated material up to date” (p. 40).

“For Mark...Galilee’s primary importance is not historical, but theological, in that it is the place of the impending parousia” (p. 59; cf. pp. 60f).

Marxsen’s point is clear: the recounting of the tradition is done not for the sake of the past, which makes itself known through the tradition, but rather for the sake of Mark’s own day. The first Gospel is in every sense of the word a “Galilean Gospel”; it was composed in Galilee and for Galilee near the close of the sixth decade when the Palestinian Christians were expecting the parousia of the Lord (pp. 41, 54-61). The inclination toward Galilee and the expectation of the parousia furnished the structuring-motif for the first evangelist. Mark’s

Gospel as a totality must be understood in terms of this contemporary perspective towards Galilee.

By way of critique, it is clear that there are refreshing features in Marxsen’s work. *Redaktionsgeschichte* represents a needed corrective

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to form criticism which tended to obscure the theologically significant role of the evangelists. In contrast to the form-critical picture of tradition as a ball which was “somehow” fashioned, only to be tossed rather carelessly from redactor to redactor—each leaving only a very smudgy fingerprint—*Redaktionsgeschichte* restores the dimension of depth to the evangelist as a man motivated by purpose who insisted upon a Christ-related-to-our-situation theology and so succeeded in conveying a sense of immediacy throughout his Gospel. The pursuit of *redaktionsgeschichtliche* research assists a student to become sensitive to the work of the evangelists in their capacity as redactors and theologians; it also will invite an appreciation of the individual character of each of the Synoptic Gospels. Because *Redaktionsgeschichte* takes seriously the unity of the Gospels, it provides guidelines for detecting the theological purpose behind the selection and arrangement of the material by the different evangelists. As a discipline it serves to caution the interpreter of the danger latent in the harmonization of two similar accounts and in the exegesis of small independent units without consideration of the Gospel as a total work.

There is no necessary reason why *Redaktionsgeschichte* should lead to the de-historicizing of the New Testament Gospel. Marxsen’s conclusions in this regard are due not to the method he uses but to his faulty presupposition that a literary work is a primary source for the historical situation out of which it arose, and is only a secondary source for the historical details concerning which it gives information. To assert that Mark made historical events subservient to his theological purpose is to affirm that there were historical events. The theological importance of these events is dependent upon the activity of God—in the wilderness and in Galilee. While the theological significance of the historical facts must not be denied, it must also be maintained that their theological meaning is dependent upon their historical occurrence.

Marxsen’s work is characterized by over-interpretation at two significant points. (1) He over-emphasizes the alleged historical situation out of which the Gospel of Mark arose. Stressing the contemporary situation of the church presumed to be in Galilee he neglects certain elements in the text which might have influenced his conclusions concerning the life situation of the Markan framework. Thus no consideration is given to features of the text which are particularly intelligible in terms of a Roman

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provenance for the Gospel.⁶ (2) In the attempt to understand the Gospels entirely from the perspective of the life situation of their redaction, Marxsen over-emphasizes the

⁶ Mark shows a distinct preference for Latin technical terms (e.g. *legion*, ch. 5:9; *speculator*, ch. 6:27; *denarius*, ch. 12:15; *quadrans*, ch. 12:42; *flagellare*, ch. 15:15; *praetorium*, ch. 15:16; centurion, ch. 15:39). On two occasions (chs. 12:42; 15:16) common Greek expressions are explained by Latin ones. In agreement with the Roman method of reckoning time Mark speaks of four watches of the night, rather than the three that were

dissimilarities in the theological conceptions of the synoptic evangelists. Neglecting existing similarities between the three Synoptic Gospels he also neglects their common point of interest—Jesus of Nazareth, the anointed Lord. Interpreting Mark 1:1 backwards, Marxsen fails to appreciate that Mark set out to write an εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Ἰησοῦ and not an εὐαγγέλιον τῆς ἐκκλησίας. The resultant injustice to the historical and theological tenor of the text reflects Marxsen’s critical presuppositions. This should not obscure the validity of *Redaktionsgeschichte* as a hermeneutical approach to understanding the text of the Gospels and the intention of the evangelists.

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traditional to Judaism (cf. chs. 6:48; 13:35). It is even possible that Mark has structured his passion narrative according to the four Roman night watches, since Jesus enters Jerusalem to share the Passover with his disciples *in the evening* (ch. 14:17); the hour of betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane is very probably *midnight* (ch. 14:41); the denial of Peter occurs in connection with *cock-crow* (ch. 14:72); and “as soon as it was morning” Jesus is brought before Pilate (ch. 15:1). If it was Mark’s intention to structure his narrative deliberately in this fashion, it was in Rome that the significance of this would be especially appreciated. Cf. R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (1950), p. 53.