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THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL (MT 9:37)

The episode of the sending out of the Twelve in St Matthew's gospel begins with the saying on the harvesters: 'The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest' (Mt. 9:37f.). This is a well-known saying of Jesus, often quoted in sermons and exhortations. A poignant expression of the urgency of Christian apostolate, it has stirred many a soul to dedicate itself entirely to the service of the Lord. But there is more in this saying than a call to generosity: it opens also interesting insights into the nature of the Christian apostolate. Though often overlooked, this aspect of the text deserves further inquiry.

I. *The context*

The logion is to be found in the very same terms in Mt. 9:37f., and in Lk. 10:2.¹ In both texts, it is placed at the beginning of the missionary discourse.

Now the missionary discourse of Lk. is not exactly that of Mt. In Mt. there is only one mission, that of the Twelve and Mt. has grouped in this context all the logia he knew concerning the apostolic ministry. From v. 17 onwards till v. 39 particularly, the thought of Jesus goes far beyond the Galilean ministry: it is clear that Mt. intended to compile here 'a complete breviary of the missionary'.²

In Lk., on the contrary, there are two missions, that of the Twelve (9:1-16) and that of the seventy-two disciples (10:1-4). There is no reason to doubt the basic accuracy of Luke's report: he would not have reduplicated the mission of the Twelve unnecessarily at so short a distance. Luke was more inclined to simplify than to duplicate.³ If he described a distinct mission of the seventy-two disciples, it is because

¹ The only difference is, in Lk., the inversion of the object and of the verb in *ergatas ekkalé*.

² P. Benoit, *L'Évangile selon St Matthieu* (BJ) (Paris, 1953), p. 74.

³ There are many instances of Luke's suppression of real or apparent doublets: vg. the seed that grows by itself (Mk. 4:26-9), the second multiplication of the loaves (Mk. 8:1-10), the question on the greatest commandment (Mk. 12:28-34), the anointing in Bethany (Mk. 14:3-9), the first session of the Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:55-64).

he found one in his sources.¹ But it appears also that, beyond the bare fact of a second mission, he did not find in his source any particulars about it. He seems to have made up for it by building up his account with the help of material diverted or repeated from the discourse to the Twelve. If so, his second missionary discourse can be presumed to derive from the first one and we are entitled to identify it with the missionary discourse of Mt. 10.²

Therefore we can say that Lk. gives the logion the same place as Mt. The simplest way to account for it is to suppose that Lk. followed an early form of the first Gospel which already had the logion at this place. Another possibility would be that the logion was borrowed by both Mt. and Lk. from some kind of Q or S source. In this case, we have to explain why both evangelists happened to put the saying in the same context. This cannot be due to chance and we have to admit, in that case, that the source, being a kind of Tosephthah, followed a plan similar to that of the first Gospel.³

Ultimately the solution depends on the basic option regarding the Synoptic problem in general. But whatever may be the solution which is preferred, the question remains of whether the logion belongs originally to the apostolic instructions given by Jesus to the Twelve on the occasion of the Galilean mission. Either in the proto-Matthew or in the Source, the position of the logion at the beginning of the missionary discourse may be due to an editorial arrangement. There are indications that this was indeed the case and that the logion was originally no part of the missionary instructions. Lagrange acutely remarks that the metaphors of the harvest and of the sheep in the previous verse 'were not meant originally to follow each other'. There is some kind of hiatus between the two similes and, of the two, it is rather that of the sheep that must have remained in its proper context since it is resumed in 10:6.⁴ Moreover, as will be seen later, the saying on the harvest opens up a universalistic horizon which is foreign to the Galilean ministry.

There is good ground for supposing that our logion belongs to another context of the life of Jesus. Mt. and Lk.—and probably their source already—prefixed it to the missionary discourse because they saw it as a fitting introduction to 'the breviary of the missionary'. They understood the institution of apostleship as an answer to Jesus' prayer to send workers to the field. Seen in this light, the logion and

¹ cf. A. Plummer, *The Gospel according to St Luke* (ICC) (Edinburgh, 1896), p. 270.

² cf. L. Cerfaux, 'La Mission de Galilée dans la Tradition Synoptique' in *Recueil Lucien Cerfaux I* (Gembloux, 1954), p. 449.

³ Following the views of L. Vaganay, *Le Problème Synoptique* (Paris-Tournai 1954), pp. 126-51. Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London 1935), p. 179.

⁴ *L'Évangile selon S. Matthieu* (Paris 1948), p. 192.

the missionary discourse explain each other. The workers are the apostles and the mission to the Gentiles is the harvest. This is surely the meaning which the Gospel redaction gave to the logion. But was this interpretation accurate? Were the evangelists faithful to the thought of the master?

2. *The Harvest*

Bultmann does not think so. According to him, the original form and meaning of the logion are difficult to determine. There may have been no such saying of Jesus and anyway it had nothing to do with the question of apostolate; possibly the pronouncement might derive from some kind of secular proverb, artificially pressed by the early church into a Christian context.¹

As a matter of fact, Bultmann cannot offer any evidence for the existence of such a proverb and it is difficult to escape the impression that his critical zeal makes him miss the obvious. There is no need to postulate unknown proverbs and go in search of far-fetched hypotheses. The background of the logion is not to be looked for in Palestinian secular wisdom but in Hebrew religious thought where the theme of the harvest was well known.

It appears already in Jer. 51. For Babylon, 'the time of her harvest will come' (v. 33); she will be 'winnowed' (v. 2); be made 'like a threshing floor' (v. 33). Similar images are used by Isaiah to announce the destruction of Ethiopia (18:5). Joel applies them to the final doom of the whole world at the end of time: 'Put in the sickle for the harvest is ripe . . . For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision' (4:13f). In this text of Joel, the theme has taken its final apocalyptic form: the harvest belongs to the last days and it covers all the nations. All the history of mankind is compared to a slow ripening at the end of which the sickle is put in and the winepress trod. This text was to have a great success and was often commented upon in later Jewish literature. We find for instance in a midrash on the psalms: 'In the future, when the day of the last judgment comes, (the nations) will be cast into the Gehenna as it is said: And the people will be burned to lime (Is. 33:22), and also: Put in the sickle for the harvest is ripe (Jl. 4:13). But the Israelites will escape.'² Jl. 4:13 is also quoted in Apoc. 14:15.³

¹ R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford 1963), p. 98.

² Midrash Ps. 2, § 14, 16a, quoted in Strack-Billerbeck IV/2, p. 1107. See other texts in Str.-Bil. I, p. 672, IV/2, p. 1106.

³ E. B. Allo, in *L'Apocalypse de St Jean*³ (Paris 1933), p. 223, thinks that, in 14:15, the harvest refers to the salvation of the world. The idea of destruction would appear only in the subsequent pericope on the vintage in vv. 17-20. Allo thinks it unlikely that the

In these texts, the harvest is the judgment of destruction for the Gentiles: as in Amos 8:2, ripe fruits (*qayîs*) mean the end (*qes*). But another line of development appears in other texts of the Old Testament. In Os. 6:11, in a gloss added to the text during the Exile, Juda is promised a harvest that is a restoration.¹ Similarly, in 4 Esdr. 4:28-38, the harvest is the 'harvest of reward', the 'harvest of the just', and in a midrash on the Canticle, the liberation of Israel is compared to the wheat harvest: if it is done before the proper time, the straw is not good.² In Is. 27:12,³ in the context of the Isaian apocalypse, the comparison is more complex: 'From Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt, the Lord will thresh out the grain': this refers to the eschatological punishment of the Gentiles, but this will be also the occasion 'to gather one by one' the people of Israel dispersed among their oppressors. The judgment has a twofold aspect as it will have in the parable of the tares (Mt. 13:36-43): doom for the wicked, salvation for Israel. It is the Apocalypse of Baruch which gives the most elaborate description of this discriminating harvest: 'When the time of this age will be ripe, there will be the harvest of the seed of the wicked and of the just.' There will be confusion and war upon the world, but 'the Holy Land will be merciful towards those who are in it and will protect its inhabitants' (70:2-71:1).⁴ Eventually all the nations which did not persecute Israel will be saved by submitting to the chosen people (71:4-6): 'the harvesters will not get tired nor will the builders toil for the work will be done of itself' (74:1; cf. Jn. 4:38; Mk. 4:27f).

These texts are suggestive. They witness to the existence of a theme of the harvest in Jewish apocalyptic literature. John the Baptist used it (Mt. 3:12; Lk. 3:17); it underlies Jesus' parables on the seed: the sower (Mk. 4:3-9 and par.), the seed growing of itself (Mk. 4:28f. which quotes Jl. 4:13) and the tares (Mt. 13:24-30). It explains also the logion on the harvest in the Synoptics as well as its equivalent in Jn. 4:35-8.

In the logion on the harvest as in the parable of the tares, 'the field

Apocalypse would repeat the same thing twice over under different images. But it would be rather a typical feature of apocalyptic literature to accumulate converging images. The similes of the harvest and of the vintage were already synonymous in the text of Joel quoted here by the Apocalypse.

¹ It may be that, at a first level, the gloss was meant to announce punishment and read: Juda also has prepared a punishment for himself (*lô* instead of *lak*): cf. A. Deissler, *Les Petits Prophètes* (Paris 1961), p. 77.

² Quoted in Str.-Bil. I, p. 672.

³ In this passage, Symmachus expanded the application of the theme of the harvest by rendering in v. 11 as *therismos* (harvest) the *qasîr* (foliage, in this context) of the Hebrew text. This shows that the theme of the harvest was so popular that it was read into texts where it did not belong.

⁴ The idea of the harvest as a discriminating judgment, with corresponding moral applications, is to be found also in 4 Esdr. 8:41 and 9:17, 2 Cor. 9:6 and Gal. 6:7-9. It underlies the parable of the tares.

is the world' and 'the harvest is the end of the world' (Mt. 13:38f.). Even if we were to grant that the allegorising interpretation of the parable of the tares is secondary, it remains that, in its outlines, the explanation of the parable as a veiled description of the final judgment for all the nations 'is undoubtedly the idea which it would suggest to the hearers'.¹ For 'the image of the harvest . . . had associations which would escape no one brought up on the Old Testament'.² The same applies also to Mt. 9:37f.³ In Mt. as in Jn., when announcing that the harvest is ripe, Jesus announces the imminence of the end. The saying opens up eschatological prospects.

It has also universalistic overtones: all the nations are to be gathered into the field of the Lord. John perceived the deep truth of the image when he appended it to the episode of the Samaritan woman: the Samaritans rally round Jesus; the barrier isolating the Jews is now pulled down. The cult of the true God is no longer limited to this or that mountain: it spreads to the whole world (vv. 21-4). Jesus is no longer given the title of King of Israel as in the beginnings of his ministry (1:49): he is now recognised as 'the saviour of the world' (4:42). The universalistic connotations of the theme of the harvest are clearly brought out in the fourth Gospel but they were already implied in the logion of Mt. and Lk.

Now, when a comparison is made between the apocalyptic theme of the harvest and the logion of Mt. 9:37, two significant differences appear.

In the logion of the Gospels—in the Synoptics as well as in Jn.—the time of the harvest has come already. The harvest is no longer expected or prophesied. It has come to pass: it is ripe and only the ingathering is left to be done. This is definitely a saying of realised eschatology.

Another difference is that the prospect of the judgment recedes into the background. Lagrange even contends that it is missing altogether.⁴ This may be going too far: the Jews would have spontaneously understood the harvest as the day of judgment and moreover the prospect of the judgment is prominent in Jesus' outlook. But it must be granted that we are far away from the apocalyptic descriptions of the Day of the Lord as a day of doom when pagans are threshed and burnt like chaff. The judgment is no longer a picture of ruin and death. It is the peaceful ingathering of the nations into the field of the Lord. We have here a typical instance of what was, according to J. Jeremias one

¹ C. H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

² C. H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³ C. H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

⁴ M. -J. Lagrange, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

of the peculiarities of Jesus' teaching: he removed the idea of vengeance from the eschatological expectation and detached the nationalistic idea of revenge from the hope of redemption.¹ Thus in Mt. 11:5f., when giving a composite quotation of Is. 35:5f., 29:18f. and 61:1, he omitted the reference to the day of vengeance which the three texts contained.² The same method appears here. The apocalyptic theme is purified of any reference to the destruction of the Gentiles, for they too will be accepted in the Kingdom. If J. Jeremias is right in seeing in this merciful attitude a characteristic feature of the teachings of the master, we have here a serious argument in favour of the genuineness of the saying.³

3. *The Labourers in the Harvest*

Now that the end has come, labourers have to be sent to the field to complete the ecumenical ingathering of the nations. In Mt., the labourers are the Twelve, in Lk. the seventy-two, in Jn., the 'disciples' in general. It would be rather difficult, if at all possible, to determine to whom the logion was addressed originally. Even if it is agreed that it is the text of Mt. which reflects better the first written stage of the Gospel tradition, it remains that, even at this first stage, the present order may have been redactory, combining with the missionary discourse a logion coming from another context. When uttered by Jesus, was this saying addressed to the inner circle of the Twelve or to the larger group of the disciples? There is no decisive way of solving the problem.

Actually the main question does not lie there. The point of the saying is that the harvesting is entrusted to *men*. For the harvest, Jesus pays no heed to the myriads of angels; he looks only at the small number of his followers. 'The workers are few': this statement must have surprised, if not shocked, the Jews used to thinking of the angels and not of men as the ministers of God's works.

In Mt. 13:39, 'the harvesters are the angels'. This is what a Hebrew audience would have spontaneously expected when told of the eschatological ingathering of the nations. Jewish apocalyptic attributed a great role to the angels in the last days.⁴ The book of Henoch in particular describes repeatedly 'the angels bringing to one place all the accomplices of guilt . . . whereas others will be set to protect the

¹ J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (London 1956), pp. 41, 43.

² *ibid.*, p. 46.

³ Even when the description of the judgment keeps its features of doom and destruction, as in the parable of the tares, the distinction is no longer made between Israel and the nations but between the just and the wicked.

⁴ See texts in Str.-Bil. I, p. 974.

just and the saints till any evil and sin be consumed' (Hen. 100:3f.; cf. 54:6; 55:3; 56:1; 62:11; 63:1): the similarity with the work of the harvesters in the parable of the tares is striking. The same imagery is used also in the Assumption of Moses, 10:2. In the New Testament, in addition to Mt. 13:39-41, it may be found in Mk. 13:27f. (=Mt. 25:32) and in Apoc. 14:6f. J. Jeremias has suggested that it may also underly Mt. 24:14 (=Mk. 13:10) and 26:13 (=Mk. 14:9).¹

Later on, in rabbinical circles, the apocalyptic imagery seems to have been questioned. A midrash on the psalms relates an interesting discussion between rabbi Pinehas and his colleagues (c. A.D. 360).² The debate is about Jl. 4:13 and the question is: To whom will God say: Put in the sickle for the harvest is ripe? Pinehas answered: To the angels, but the others said: To the Israelites. Pinehas argued only from the authority of his predecessors: his must have been the traditional view. Now this traditional view was challenged by his opponents but the tortuous argument they had to offer³ proves they realised that the *onus probandi* lay with themselves. Their interpretation represented a departure from the common run of ideas. It was a kind of *entmythologisierung* reducing the apocalyptic imagery to the level of earthly realities.

In a way, Jesus' saying on the harvesters in Mt. 9:37f. belongs to the same 'demythologising' tendency. Of course Jesus does not go in for such exegetical antics as the rabbis. He speaks with authority, as one who knows the mind of the Father and needs not argue about it. His logion expresses the certitude that the last times have come and that there is no need to wait for the angels to usher in the new world. This will be the work of the apostles. They will bring to the world news of the judgment, for their preaching amounts to a judgment (Mt. 10:13-16). Through them, God Himself realises His eschatological visitation to the world (Mt. 10:40 and par.).

C. H. Dodd sees a contradiction between Mt. 9:37f. and 13:39.⁴ According to him, Mt. 9:37f., being a perfect example of realised eschatology, must be genuine and therefore 13:39 cannot but be secondary. It would seem rather that it is the idea of the angelic

¹ op. cit., pp. 22, 24, 69.

² Midrash on Ps. 8, § 1, 37a, quoted in Str.-Bil. I, p. 672.

³ 'For the Israelites do not sing by the harvest, nor by the vintage, nor by the olive crop but by the wine press since it is said (in the title of Ps. 8): To the music master as in the song of the wine press (this is the meaning given by the midrash to the word *hagganith* of the Hebrew text), canticle of David'. Then follows a typically rabbinical study of the symbolism of these various titles. Later on, the same midrash raises a similar question: 'How will the judgment upon the nations be executed? Will they be handed over to the angel or cast into Gehenna? God answered: Everything is left to you and it is up to you to put them to death as you think fit; for the blood avenger must kill the murderer (Num. 35:21; Ex. 25:14)' (§ 187a). Cf. Str.-Bil., *ibid.*

⁴ op. cit., pp. 179, 181.

eschatological ministry which is primary, in the sense that it is even pre-Christian, belonging to the common Hebrew ideological stock of the first Christian century. According to the particular teaching he had in mind, Jesus could either merely borrow this set of ready-made images, or transpose it into terms of the new order of things he had come to set up. There is no contradiction between the two lines of thought. The apostles are really the angels who constitute the train of the son of Man. At the time of his trial, Jesus could have called legions of angels (Mt. 26:52) but he wanted to have only the Twelve round him (Mt. 26:36f. and par.). Having been his retinue on earth, they will follow him also into the kingdom (Lk. 22:28f.=Mt. 19:28). The *met' autou* of Mk. 3:14 corresponds to that of Zc. 14:5 (alluded to in Mt. 25:31): the Son of Man and his suite is Jesus and the Twelve.

Thus according to the Qumran texts, the service of God is rendered by both the angels in heaven and the community on earth. The Qumran community is identified with the heavenly host and the angelic terminology is used to describe the life of the sect, its cult (cf. the fragment on the Angelic Liturgy) as well as its battles (compare the heavenly battles of Hymn 3:35f. and 8:11f. with the more earthly battles of War 7:6 and 12:8f.=19:1). Such texts show at least that for the Hebrew mind, there was no contradiction between an apocalyptic representation of the armies of heaven and a more concrete description applying this imagery to the life in this world. Their thought moved at the same time on two levels or rather considered as a unique global reality what we now consider to be distinct levels of existence. For them there was no sharp distinction between earthly and heavenly life since, according to a sentence that recurs frequently in the writings of the sect, 'their lot is with the Holy ones (the angels), with the sons of Heaven' (Rule 11:7; cf. Hymns 3:22; 6:13; 11:12f.; Ben. 4:25f.).

To sum up. The logion on the harvest and the labourers has all the characteristics of a genuine saying of the Lord. It may not belong originally to the missionary discourse and it is difficult to ascertain what may have been its original historical context. Possibly it was one of the favourite maxims of the master which he used to repeat, to impress it upon the minds of the disciples. According to the circumstances, he probably pronounced it in different forms: this would account for the different cast of the logion in the Synoptic and Johanne traditions.

In any case it does belong ideally to the context where Mt. and Lk. placed it at the beginning of the missionary discourse. The saying expresses the nature and the urgency of the missionary apostolate.

Apostolate is a co-operation in the harvest by which, on the last days, all the nations must be gathered for the Lord.

Therefore the apostolate has first a universalistic character: the field is the world. The Good Tidings announced first in Galilee must resound throughout the world and the saving activity has to reach all the nations.

Secondly, it has an eschatological aspect: the harvest is the end of the world. While men think that 'there are yet four months and then only will the harvest come', the work of the apostles shows that the fields 'are already white for the harvest'. The day has come for the harvesters to enter the field: the judgment has begun and becomes actual wherever the voice of the apostle can reach.

Lastly, it has an angelic value: the harvesters are the angels. The missionary is an angel in the literal sense of the term, an *angelos*, a messenger. He is even as much superior to the angels as the message he has been entrusted with is superior to any message ever entrusted to angels. For this message is the eternal and substantial Word of God, total expression of God's redeeming love.

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PRIESTS AND PEOPLE

Any reflection on the role of the Church, the people of God, must begin with the Exodus. It was by the Exodus that God redeemed Israel and at the same time created them as His people. It was by the Exodus that He revealed His loving choice of them. This was the beginning of a new relationship between God and man; God became again their Father, He begot them, they became His first-born sons (Ex. 4:22); like a shepherd, He led them through the wilderness to food and rest (cf. Ps. 80:1), He was their leader in battle, their king. But the supreme expression of this relationship was the covenant, by which God became 'God with them', God in their midst, with the tabernacle as the sign of His dwelling among them.

This covenant was not merely an agreement which God made with the nation; it was the focal point and principle of unity of their national existence. How true this is can be seen from recent studies into the tribal origins of Israel, which suggest that these were not quite so simple as it might appear, not simply a matter of descent from Jacob-Israel. The Bible itself lets it be seen that others besides the descendants of Jacob could be incorporated into the nation: Rahab of Jericho, for