

CHAPTER 21

Impact of Markan Priority on Teaching Christianity

The Markan Priority theory has had a devastating impact on public confidence in the historical reliability of the Christian message. The theory rests on the study of the Gospels as literature only (i.e. internal evidence). It is based on the 'poor' Greek of Mark's gospel. The records of the ancient historians (external evidence) are ignored.

In the late 19th century the German Government, for political reasons, imposed the exclusive teaching of the Markian Priority theory at the Universities. After taking root amongst Protestant clerical students, it spread to the English-speaking world.

Based on the acceptance of the theory, a logical progression of reasoning could claim that the gospels were written generations after the life of Christ. They were therefore not reliable historical records of what he said and did. In America, a Protestant backlash led to the birth of Fundamentalism, based on a literalist reading of the bible. Other Protestants accepted the theory and their churches drifted from firm doctrinal positions.

In 1893, Pope Leo XIII led the Catholic reaction. He issued an Encyclical condemning any theory which ignored the evidence of the ancient historians, and relied on internal analysis alone. He called for greater historical and linguistic research and allocated funds for it.

This was a positive move but, in 1907, the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) was established. Its mission was to give safe guidance to educational establishments. But, under Pope Pius X, it became very cautious and its strictures gravely hindered the freedom required for meaningful research.

In 1912 the PBC decided that Catholic institutions had to hold that the order of writing had been Matthew-Mark-Luke-John. In doing so, it prevented the development of Catholic scientific research. In 1943 Pope Pius XII ease the strictures, but not enough to prevent Catholic biblical exegetes becoming increasingly frustrated.

At the 2nd Vatican Council (1962-5) it was agreed that there should be greater intellectual freedom and, in 1971, the PBC was abolished in all but name. At the time of the Council, the pent-up frustration of Catholic biblical scholars had exploded with joy and, from that time, the strictures of the PBC were ignored.

Catholic Scripture exegetes faced freedom after fifty years of restrictions and stagnation. In 1968 three leading American researchers, Raymond Brown, J. Fitzmyer and R. Murphy published *The Jerome Bible Commentary*. In it they judged that despite years of Protestant endeavour only two: ***'orders of dependence have really been able to hold any ground: Matthew- Mark- Luke, and Mark as the source of Matthew and Luke.'*** (i.e. Markan Priority).

The first was based on the historical traditions, (external evidence) while the second put its trust in internal evidence only. In union with most other Catholic experts they decided that the second order was more likely to be correct. They hoped the theory would also be a means of protecting youth from the teachings of Fundamentalist sects.

The Marcan Priority theory had not been proved and most experts, Protestant and Catholic, were not fully convinced of its correctness. It was taught widely because there didn't seem to be anything better. Brown appeared to some Catholics to be a heretic. But he and his colleagues were dedicated Catholics. Protestants had been studying the problem in freedom for decades. So Brown and his colleagues, by accepting the best evidence provided by Protestant logical scientific research, saw themselves as bringing Catholics to face reality and become up-to-date.

In their 1968 Commentary they showed a spirit of humility. At the conclusion of an article on the Synoptic Problem they wrote: ***'We are still a long way from a completely satisfactory answer. Perhaps the problem will never be totally solved. The challenge however still remains and will continue to be accepted by dedicated scholars'***. In 1972 and again in 1996, Rome appointed Brown to be a member of the reorganized consultative PBC. He was also much admired by Cardinal Ratzinger.

The 1968 Commentary did not consider the theory, put forward in 1764, by Henry Owen. He had claimed the synoptic gospels were written in the order of Matthew-Luke-Mark. As the first to challenge the order established by Jerome, Owen (an Anglican vicar) had launched modern scriptural research.

Owen's approach was not developed within the Protestant world, and Catholic research of his theory was prevented by the 1912 PBC statement: ***'it was not permissible to depart from the opinion that Matthew, Mark and Luke were composed in that order'***.

Catechetical Renewal

On returning home from the Council, the bishops were keen to renew catechetical methods. These had become distorted and unbalanced due to the need for responses to Protestant challenges. The renewal would emphasize the centrality of Christ and be more firmly based on Scripture.

So the bishops appointed priests who had specialised in Scripture to re-organise catechetics. These were eager to help the church embrace the modern age by accepting the 'scientific' truth of the Marcan Priority theory. The introduction of modern catechetics was thereby greatly influenced by the theory. This often led to the replacement of firm doctrinal teaching by vague speculations as to what Christ actually taught. The confusion provoked some to oppose all renewal.

In 1971, Cardinal Wright (U.S.A.) wrote: ***'...wheat, the harvest of the Council, is rich and abundant, but some enemies, not all outside the Church, have sown cockle in the midst of the wheat'***.

Cardinal Heenan (U.K.) agreed: ***'Some of our Catechists are teaching a theology of their own ... the faithful will be led to believe that there is no dogmatic theology left and that everything is a matter of free speculation'***.

To meet this situation, ***The Catechism of the Catholic Church*** was issued in 1992. Afterwards, Cardinal Ratzinger noted that most of the criticism of it had come from biblical experts who accused it of ignoring modern exegesis.

A Third Way

When the authors of the 1968 American Commentary forecasted that the challenge of the Synoptic Problem would continue to be accepted by dedicated scholars, they were correct. English researchers, accepting that the strictures of the PBC had been superseded by the teachings of Vatican II, were already researching Owen's ideas.

They were led by Bernard Orchard OSB. Before the Council, he had negotiated and edited the Catholic edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSVCE). It was refused an Imprimatur but, immediately after the Council in 1966, it obtained one. Orchard was a joint founder of the British and the World Associations of Catholic biblical scholars, and editor of both editions of: **A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture (1953 and 1981)**

Orchard was saddened to see Catholic exegetes accepting Markan Priority. Fellow English Benedictines, John Chapman O.S.B. and Abbott Butler O.S.B, had published books defending Matthew's Gospel as being the first written. (e.g. The Priority of Matthew in 1951). But they had failed to account for Mark's 'poor Greek'.

Orchard set his mind to solving the 'Synoptic Problem' and especially the 'poor' Greek of Mark. With a small circle of colleagues including Harold Riley, an Anglican, and W. R. Farmer, an American Methodist, he was eventually successful.

Orchard pointed out that the well informed Clement of Alexandria had stated: *'The first written of the gospels were those having the genealogies'*. Then from other evidence, Orchard deduced that Mark had used Greek shorthand to record talks by Peter. Peter had used common (i.e. poor) Greek, when conflating the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Based on this scenario it can be seen from Clement's account, that copies of Mark's notes were distributed before Luke published his gospel widely. So the sequences of Matthew-Mark-Luke and Matthew-Luke-Mark were both correct. It depended whether the sequence referred to was that of writing or of publication.

In various articles Orchard indicated the way his mind was moving. He started to compose a definitive book setting out his researches and conclusions in full. Unfortunately, he died before its completion. This present booklet has been produced to insure Orchard's creative breakthrough, based on the Clementine's tradition, is not lost.

Ecumenism and the Future

Those who, over many years, contributed to the vindication of the Clementine tradition came from a broad background. Henry Owen (Anglican), J.J.Griesbach (Lutheran), H.U.Meijboom (Lutheran), J.Chapman (RC), B.C.Butler (RC), W.R.Farmer (Methodist), J.J.Kiweit (Calvanist), E.R.Richards (Baptist), L.Johnson (RC), John Robinson (Anglican), Harold Riley (Anglican) and Bernard Orchard (RC). All Christians are now able to co-operate in re-establishing the public acceptance of the historical reliability of the Gospels.