



## David Parker. The Living Texts of the Gospels review by Jim Cox

David Parker was a tutor of mine while I was training for Ministry. We shared a love of rugby and cricket and occasionally discussed New Testament scholarship. Lovely chap and he had an excellent way of explaining things. Which is why I was surprised to find this book more complicated than I felt it needed to be. I first read it 30 years ago and even coming to it now with more experience I have a similar feeling.

His basic premise is that there is no single version of any of the Gospels in antiquity. Indeed, there is evidence that over the first 150 years the texts were altered – sometimes dramatically. In comparison with the Hebrew scripture, the Masoretic Text, which has been pretty much faithfully kept intact, the gospels show signs not of clerical error but of deliberate ‘clarification’ and harmonization.

He points out that the quest for an ‘original’ gospel is futile. He uses as an example Mozart who might write a score, then get the orchestra to play it and on the evidence of his ears amends it. Which is the ‘original’?

The earliest physical fragments of gospel date from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century. There is evidence that the earliest records are on papyrus (rather than parchment) and in the form of a codex – a ring-bound notebook (rather than scroll) – which indicates that the writers didn’t think they were writing ‘scripture’. This lack of status and the fact that heresies arose meant the early church leaders felt free to adapt the texts they received to clarify the church’s self-understanding. It’s not until the 10<sup>th</sup> century that there is anything like an agreed text.

The obvious late additions which we have in our modern Bibles are the story of the woman caught in adultery in John, for which there is no early evidence and the ending of Mark’s gospel which has 2 spurious additions. Surprisingly, there is not even an agreed version of the Lord’s Prayer – Matthew and Luke giving alternative accounts – nor the events of the Last Supper.

The teaching on divorce has many variants in both the surviving and rejected versions. And Mark – the oldest of the gospels – has already interpolated Jesus’ words for his Roman audience by expanding the prohibition to include women, who had no right to seek a divorce in ancient Israel – but could in ancient Rome. Jesus may have spoken more than once on the topic – and may have given different answers – but it seems likely from the earliest versions of the text that Jesus was trying to protect vulnerable women from being ‘cast off’ rather than trying to impose a discipline.

The ending of Mark is odd. It is possible (though Parker thinks unlikely) that the original ending was lost or incomplete. Some say the Greek ends “... because they were afraid of ...” without a direct object. But Mark’s grammar is elsewhere suspect, so this need not be definitive. Rather, Parker believes, Mark is deliberate in omitting a resurrection appearance as this is the experience of his readers. The women don’t ‘see’ Jesus and Mark’s point is that faith does not have to depend on this eyewitness evidence. But later redactors felt Mark was denying the resurrection, so added one. Which changes Mark’s account from one of faith to one of evidence and that may not have been his intention. Like us, the women are TOLD Jesus is risen – they don’t SEE him.

Parker is keen for us to imagine the physicality of the documents. From earliest times, the codex facilitated textual study. It was much easier to keep a finger in one page and look at another. Not so easy on a scroll – as those dependent on mobile phones for their diaries know only too well. But later, even after an agreed text was established, each copy was made by a scribe and subject to some variation. The invention of mass production through printing changed that, giving the Bible an authority it had not hitherto enjoyed.

His opinion is that the texts of the gospels began with a tradition of variation, amendment and clarification and that to pick an arbitrary edition and declare it authoritative is an idolatrous attitude to the text. Rather we are to be people of the Spirit, sensitive to discerning helpful ways of interpreting the scriptures.

Parker’s points are well made. The book itself retains lots of evidence in the body of the text, which, for the sake of clarity, might have been better kept to the appendices. But it is a warning against the use of ‘proof-texts’ in moral and theological arguments and a caution – or perhaps, liberation – to us all when reading our Bibles.