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'Good Master' and the 'Good' Sayings in the Teaching of Jesus

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*In honour of Ernst Käsemann (*12. Juli 1906) who taught us that the greatest matters depend on the closest possible attention to detail.*

In Mark 10:17-19 there is a report of an exchange between a man and Jesus in which Jesus seems to deny to any human being the right to be called good, for 'No one is good except one, God'. Jesus seems therefore to deny that he is good. The Church Fathers took the point differently. They argued that Jesus is congratulating the man on his having discerned that the one he called 'good' was in fact God. This traditional explanation of the scene is hardly likely to appeal to modern readers, for surely the man would not have understood Jesus' alleged point.

Many commentators have drawn attention to the different version of the incident preserved in Matthew's Gospel, where the man asks about 'the good', and these commentators have concluded that Matthew was embarrassed about the possible implications of Mark's account of the incident and changed it (Matt 19:16-17).

This explanation for the difference between Matthew and Mark we can set aside. The reason this explanation fails is that Matthew's version still contains the difficulty the alleged change was supposed to remove. Matthew allows Jesus to go on to say, 'Why do you ask me about the good? One person is good.' The man who asks about the good is told that Jesus is not the one to ask because he is not good; only one person is good, namely God. That is the very difficulty that Matthew allegedly removed by his earlier 'change'.

Let us start with Mark's account. This account can hardly be an actual historical report of the man's question and Jesus' answers. Verse 18 clearly disrupts the natural flow from verse 17 to verse 19; the man respectfully addressed Jesus and asked about what he should do to inherit life. He got a considerate answer, beginning, 'You know the commandments'. It would have been impertinent of

Jesus to quibble with the terms of address the man had used. The man was asking an urgent question and the polite form of address he used was only a convention, having nothing more to do with the question than to signal that the man regarded Jesus as a reliable teacher in religious matters. The form of address, 'O good one', is quite common in Greek (e.g. Plato, *Protagoras* 311A; 314D; 339C) and not unknown in rabbinic accounts (A voice in a dream to Eleazar of Hagraunia: 'Good greeting to the good Rabbi from the good Lord', b.Taan 24b). Jacob addresses Joseph as ὦ τέκνον χρηστόν in TBenj 3:7. Moreover, the quibble was senseless. The reason the man called Jesus 'good' was obvious; he could have meant nothing more than that he honoured Jesus as a teacher.

But Jesus has a second remark to add to his question. He adds the information that no one is good except God. This is equally beside the point. There is an obvious sense in which no one is good except God, the sense in which no goodness can compete with God's goodness, and no goodness can exist without the prior existence of the good Lord. The statement is not meant to exclude the possibility of calling creatures 'good', and they are frequently called so in our literature (2 Sam 18:27; Prov 12:2; Qoh 9:2; TSym 4:4; TDan 1:4; TAsher 4:1; Matt 12:35; Luke 23:50). Yet the statement in this context only has point if it is taken to exclude calling anyone good except God.

When the two are taken together, the question of Jesus and the theological statement, the reader must think that Jesus is raising the problem about whether or not he is God. It is extremely unlikely that Jesus would raise the question at all, for such speculation is foreign to the accounts of his teaching in the Synoptic Gospels. It is even more unlikely that he would raise the question in the by-play before he got down to answering the serious question posed him by the man.

I wish to propose that Mark's account is a collection of originally independent sayings, each of which contained the word 'good'. Each taken by itself makes perfect sense. The combination causes havoc to modern historical readers - but, of course, the combination raised no problems for the original compiler. He knew

Jesus was God; by putting together the independent question, 'Why call me good?' and the independent statement, 'No one is good save God' with the request of the man who asked what he should do to inherit eternal life and the bare tradition that Jesus was once called 'Good Teacher', he believed that he was simply confirming the second article of the creed.

Is there any evidence to make such a hypothesis as I am advancing at all likely? The failure of previous scholars to agree on a satisfactory solution of the enigma at least emboldens us to cast our net wider. Curiously enough, it is the text of Matthew's version that begins to provide us with solid grounds for entertaining a solution on the lines suggested.

Let us print the text of the Codex Vaticanus of Matt 19:16-17 (ignoring the first hand's omission of εἰς) alongside the text of the Textus Receptus; and then let us add the text of Justin Martyr *Apol.* I 16:6-7 and *Dial.* 101:2.

Vaticanus	TR	Apol	Dial
διδάσκαλε	διδάσκαλε	διδάσκαλε	διδάσκαλε
Τί ἀγαθὸν	ἀγαθέ	ἀγαθέ	ἀγαθέ
ποιήσω	Τί ἀγαθὸν		
ἵνα σχῶ	ποιήσω		
ζωὴν	ἵνα ἔχω		
αἰώνιον	ζωὴν		
Τί με	αἰώνιον		
ἔρωτᾶς	Τί με		Τί με
περὶ τοῦ	λέγεις		λέγεις
ἀγαθοῦ	ἀγαθοῦ		ἀγαθοῦ
εἰς ἔστιν	οὐδεὶς	οὐδεὶς	εἰς ἔστιν
ὁ ἀγαθός	ἀγαθός	ἀγαθός	ἀγαθός
	εἰ μὴ μόνος	εἰ μὴ μόνος	
	ὁ θεός	ὁ θεός	
		ὁ ποιήσας	ὁ πατήρ μου
		τὰ πάντα	ὁ ἐν τοῖς
			οὐρανοῖς

Note the following features of the textual tradition.

a) The Textus Receptus of Matthew and the text of the Codex Vaticanus in Matthew agree against Mark 10:17 and Luke 18:18 in making the question a question about what good thing should be done to have eternal life; Mark and Luke have simply 'What should I do to inherit eternal life?' Mark and Luke's form is found independently in Luke 10:25.

b) Luke 10:25 begins simply 'Teacher', in this agreeing with the Vaticanus of Matt 19:16 against the Textus Receptus of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Both Justin's versions begin 'Good Teacher', but neither of Justin's versions has a question similar to the question noted in (a) above.

c) Jesus' reply has two parts, a counter-question and a statement. In the Vaticanus version of Matthew, Jesus raises the counter-question, 'Why do you ask me about the good?' In the Textus Receptus of Matthew and in Justin's *Dialogue* (but not in Justin's *Apology*) the counter-question is in the form, 'Why call me good?' Justin's *Apology* has nothing equivalent.

d) When we come to the statement, the form of the Vaticanus version, 'One is good', agrees with the form of the statement in Justin's *Dialogue*, whereas the form of the statement in the Textus Receptus of Matthew agrees with the form of the statement in Justin's *Apology*, as with the form in Mark and Luke: 'No one is good except one...'

What are we to conclude from these observations? It is highly unlikely that the Textus Receptus of Matthew is simply a 'correction' of Matthew according to the pattern provided by Mark and Luke, for the Textus Receptus agrees with Mark and Luke in features (b), (c), and (d), but not in feature (a). Why should feature (a) escape 'correction' along with (b), (c), and (d)? Nor is it likely that the Codex Vaticanus form of Matthew is a 'correction' of the Textus Receptus form. Feature (b) might be considered such, were it not that we have an independent version in Luke 10:25 that prefaced a request by the simple, 'Teacher!' We could entertain a theory that the Codex Vaticanus version had 'corrected' the Textus

Receptus by making Jesus' counter-question, 'Why do you ask me concerning the good?', but it is hard to see why the following statement 'One is good' was made as a 'correction' of 'No one is good except One'. Here the two versions in Justin come in to play to suggest a simpler explanation than the various theories that one editor was 'correcting' another: Justin's *Apology* has no counter-question and it has the version of the statement about God that agrees with the Textus Receptus of Matthew, whereas Justin's *Dialogue* has a counter-question that agrees with the the Textus Receptus of Matthew and a version of the statement about God that agrees with the Vaticanus version of the statement about God in Matthew.

The simplest hypothesis is that there were in circulation two versions of the address (feature b): 'Teacher!' and 'Good Teacher!'; two versions of the question (feature a); two versions of the counter-question (feature c); and two versions of the statement about God (feature d). Different combinations of these features came independently to each of our four streams of tradition. Curiously, the Codex Vaticanus of Matthew and the Textus Receptus of Matthew seem to show variant versions of similar traditions; either one displaced the other, or each was an independent insertion of similar (but different) material at the same place.

So far I have confined our attention to a relatively restricted body of evidence about these sayings. The time has come to bring in some further evidence. When this evidence is taken into account, we have good grounds for supposing that there were in circulation nine separate sayings that involve the word 'good' and a tenth that also needs to be taken into account even although it does not contain the word 'good'. The ten sayings, with the supporting evidence, are as follows. The sayings are numbered 1-10, but, as 1 and 2 are alternatives, 3 and 4 are alternatives, 5-7 are variants of the same idea, and 8-10 are variants of the same idea, these sayings are grouped under the capital letters A, B, C and D.

A

1. διδάσκαλε

Matt 19:16 B

Luke 10:25; om. D

magister

Ev. sec. Hebraeos (Origen, *Comm. in Matt.* 15:14)

ῥαββουνί (ὃ λέγεται διδασκάλε)

John 20:16

Cf. John 13:13; Matt 23:8,10

διδασκάλε Ἰησοῦ

Papyrus Egerton 2 (frag. 2r)

2. διδασκάλε ἀγαθέ

Matt 19:16 TR; Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18

Justin, *Apol.* I 16:7; *Dial.* 101:2

Marcion (Epiphanius, *Schol.* 50 (42.11.17))

Irenaeus 1.13.2 (Harvey 1.178)

Adamantius, *Dial.* II.17

Marcosians (Epiphanius, *Pan. haer.* 34.18.11)

Ephrem, *Comm.* 15.2

B

3. Τί ἀγαθὸν ποιήσου ἵνα ἔχω/σχῶ ζωὴν αἰώνιον;

Matt 19:16 TR/B

quid bonum faciens vivam?

Ev. sec. Hebraeos (Origen, *Comm. in Matt.* 15:14)

4. Τί ποιήσω ἵνα ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω;

Mark 10:17

Τί ποιήσας ζωὴν αἰώνιον κληρονομήσω;

Luke 10:25; 18:18

Marcion (Epiphanius, *Schol.* 50 (42.11.15))

Adamantius, *Dial.* II.17

C

5. Τί με λέγεις ἀγαθόν;

Matt 19:17 TR; om. Γ

Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19

Marcion (Hippolytus, *Refut. omn. haer.* vii.31.6)

Justin, *Dial.* 101:2

Ev. Naassen. (Hippolytus, *Refut. omn. haer.* v.7.26)

Marcosians (Eriphanius, *Pan. haer.* 34.18.11)

Arians (Eriphanius, *Pan haer.* 69.19.1)

Adamantius, *Dial.* II.17

Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.13.2 (Harvey 1.178)

Τί με λέγετε ἀγαθόν

Marcion (Hippolytus, *Refut. omn. haer.* vii.31.6)

Τί με καλεῖτε τῷ στόματι ὑμῶν διδάσκαλον

μὴ ἀκούοντες ὃ λέγω;

Papyrus Egerton 2 (frag. 2r)

Τί δέ με καλεῖτε κύριε κύριε καὶ οὐ ποιεῖτε ἃ λέγω;

Luke 6:46

6. μή με λέγε ἀγαθόν

Marcion (Eriphanius, *Schol.* 50 (42.11.15))

Simon Magus (PsClement, *Hom.* 18.1)

7. τί με ἐρωτᾶς περὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ;

Matt 19:17 B

Luke 18:19 sy^C

D

8. οὐδεις ἀγαθός εἰ μὴ ὁ θεός.

Matt 19:17 TR; Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19

Adamantius, *Dial.* II.17; cf. I.1

οὐδεις ἀγαθός εἰ μὴ ὁ μόνος ὁ θεός

Justin, *Apol.* I 16:7; cf. Mark 10:18 D

nemo bonus praeter unum sit deum patrem

Origen, *De princip.* ii.5.1

οὐδεις ἀγαθός εἰ μὴ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς

Clement, *Paed.* 1.8 (72.2; cf. 74.1)

non est bonus nisi unus pater qui in caelo

Ephrem, *Comm.* 15.2 (Leloir, Syriac 140;

cf. Syriac & Armenian 264)

9. εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ ἀγαθός.

Matt 19:17 B

Marcion (Epiphanius, Schol. 50 (42.11.15))

εἷς ἐστὶν ἀγαθός

Justin, Dial. 101.2

Ev. Naassen. (Hippolytus, *Refut. omn. haer.* v.7.26)

Marcion (Hippolytus, *Refut omn. haer.* vii.31.6)

Marcosians (Epiphanius, *Pan. haer.* 34.18.11)

Arians (Epiphanius, *Pan haer.* 69.19.1)

Valentinus (Clement, *Strom.* 2.20 (114.3.6))

Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.13.2 (Harvey 1.178)

εἷς ... μόνος ἐστὶν ἀγαθός

Ptolemaeus, *Epist. ad Florum.* 5.4 (Epiphanius,

Pan haer. 33.7.5)

ὁ ...ἀγαθός εἷς ἐστὶν

Simon Magus (PsClement, *Hom.* 18.1)

10. Τίς ἐστὶν ἀγαθός εἰ μὴ εἷς ὁ θεός;

sed quis optimus nisi unus...deus?

Marcion (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* iv.36.3)

Observe that the sources contain one, two, three or all four of the categories A, B, C and D.

One of the possible four categories:

D8: Adamantius I; Origen; Clement

D9: Ptolemaeus; Valentinus

D10: Marcion (Tertullian)

Two of the possible four categories:

A+B

1+3: Ev. Heb.

A+C

1+5: Pap. Egerton 2

A+D

2+8: Justin, *Apol.*; Ephrem

C+D

5+9: Marcion (Hippolytus); Arians

6+9: Simon Magus

Three of the possible four categories:

A+C+D

2+5+9: Justin, *Dial.*; Marcosians; Irenaeus

Four of the possible four categories:

A+B+C+D

1+3+7+9: Matthew B

2+3+5+8: Matthew TR

2+4+5+8: Mark; Luke; Adamantius II

2+4+6+9: Marcion (Epiphanius)

We are not surprised to find sayings in category D standing alone. There was already in the Old Testament the command to give thanks unto the Lord for he is good (Psalm 117(118):1,29; 53(54):6 &c.; cf. 1 Chron 16:34; 2 Chron 5:13; 2 Esdras (4 Ezra) 8:52; Philo, *Leg. alleg.* i.47; *De somn.* i.149). A statement analogous to the idea that God alone is good is found in 1 Kgs (1 Sam) 2.2:ὄτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἅγιος ὡς κύριος καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν δίκαιος ὡς ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν. οὐκ ἔστιν ἅγιος πλὴν σοῦ. A similar idea also occurs in the sayings of Jesus at Matt 23:9:καὶ πατέρα μὴ καλέσητε ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, εἷς γάρ ἐστιν ὑμῶν ὁ πατὴρ ὁ οὐράνιος. Jesus of course did not mean that people were to cease addressing their earthly fathers as 'Father'; rather, no earthly father, however good, could rival the Father in heaven, ἐξ οὗ πάντα πατριά ἐν οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς ὀνομάζεται (Eph 3:15).

However, there are strong grounds for believing that sayings from all four categories, even the first, could have originally been transmitted alone. In the sources with only two of the four categories we find A combined with each of B and C and D. Sayings in category A would very naturally be found with other sayings, so that we are justified in concluding that B and C as well as D sometimes stood alone. It is possible, but not likely, that our

sources containing one or two or three categories of sayings were always giving only extracts from longer collections containing all four types of sayings. It is likely that some, if not all, of the cases of exact agreement show literary dependence (e.g. 2+4+5+8: Mark, Luke, Adamantius II). But once we leave the cases of exact agreement, there is no obvious master combination that has been altered by editorial activity. Each difference which, taken by itself might be thought an editorial alteration, is always found intact in some other context. The strongest candidate for being regarded as an editorial alteration is No. 7 above; search for knowledge of 'the good' was a prime activity of Greek philosophers (e.g. Plato, *Republic* Book 6 [505-506]). Yet even No. 7 is also found complete in the Syriac Curetonian version of Luke 18:19. It is just as likely that Jesus, in an independent tradition, was thought to have enquired why a questioner imagined that a Galilean teacher could pronounce on the key philosophical issue of the day as that an editor introduced this point by changing 'Why call me good?'

The impression that sayings in each category originally stood alone is heightened when we look more closely at the sayings one by one. The hardest to imagine as standing alone are the sayings in group A, and my theory would not be greatly harmed if anyone should assert that sayings in the other three categories usually had an introduction, 'Teacher' or 'Good teacher', and that these addresses were too enclitic ever to have stood alone. The case for saying that they could have been transmitted alone rests on a scrap of evidence from John's Gospel and some general observations. In John 20:16 (cf. 13:13) Mary greets the risen Lord with the one word of homage, ῥαββουί. Here at least is one occasion when the address is preserved without any further statement or request. That Jesus was addressed as 'Good teacher' might well have been so rare and unusual that tradition recollected it without any further information about who said it or in what circumstances it was said. We recall that the three addresses κύριε, διδάσκαλε and ἐπιστάτα were in all likelihood variant translations of the one Hebrew or Aramaic address of the sailors to Jesus in the storm (Matt 8:25; Mark 4:38; Luke 8:24), so that any anticipations of the early Christian confession κύριος would be treasured by the tradition (1 Cor 12:3).

The case for holding that sayings in group B were transmitted without C- or D-type sayings hardly needs arguing. The question about what to do to be saved was a standing question, asked by everyone who had received a glimpse of a day of judgment lying ahead (Luke 3:10; 10:25; Acts 2:37; 16:30).

The heart of my case is to show that the sayings in group C originally stood alone and historically were not the prelude to the denial that anyone was good except God. The key to the problem is the realisation that sayings 5 and 6 were elliptical. The question, 'Why call me good?' implied: 'and do not do what I say', and the command, 'Do not call me good' implied: 'if you do not do what I say'. This natural reading is confirmed by two analogous sayings, Papyrus Egerton 2, 'Why do you call me with your mouth "Teacher" while not hearing what I say?', and Luke 6:46, 'Why do you call me "Lord, Lord" and do not do what I say?'

Saying 7 is a rather different variant of the same thing. It too is elliptical. The understood answer to the question, 'Why ask me about the good?' is 'You have Moses and the prophets' (cf. ἔχουσιν Μωϋσέα καὶ τοὺς προφήτας Luke 16:29; cf. Luke 16:31; John 5:45-47; Papyrus Egerton 2 frag. 1v).

The combination of saying A2 with all or some of types B, C and D was perfectly natural, and once saying A1 was combined with B3, the urge to add one or both of the two remaining categories would be irresistible. We have long known that Jewish and Christian sayings were gathered according to catch-words. Here the catch-word was the word 'good'. The collectors were serenely confident that everything that was transmitted agreed in doctrine with everything else. They saw sayings of type C cohering with sayings of type D because Jesus was the incarnate Son of God and the reason people could call him good when God alone was good was because he was God. They did not wonder that a question about what to do to inherit eternal life should be turned aside into an enquiry about who alone was good, because what one did and what one believed about God and his Son were closely intertwined. They did not think it odd that Jesus should pick up the

fact that he was addressed as 'Good teacher' in order to launch into a discourse on the only good One, namely God. We, quite rightly, cannot regard these combinations as realistic descriptions of any one encounter of Jesus with an earnest enquirer. But once we understand the history of the tradition, we begin to recover a set of entirely realistic sayings: one address to Jesus and three pronouncements of Jesus. Jesus was addressed as 'Teacher' and 'Good teacher'. He was asked what to do to have eternal life. He often pressed his admirers with the question, 'Why do you call me good?'. He also asserted that no one is good save God.

The key to the difficulties raised by this, perhaps the most difficult passage in all the Gospels, is to understand that we are dealing with the work of collectors. The collectors were collectors of what was given to be treasured; the best way, almost the only way they knew to preserve the treasures was, like makers of mosaics, to set the treasured sayings into a picture. Small mosaics were enlarged and added to other mosaics. The most extensive mosaics, but not the only surviving examples, are our Gospels. We can still enjoy the various tiny collections that preserved the 'good' sayings, but we need also to see that the individual coloured pieces were originally separate, each telling a different story without at all contradicting one another or getting in one another's way.

12 July, 1993