

CHRISTIAN FASTING Mk. 2, 18-22

In an earlier article¹ we considered the question of fasting as it is found in Mt. 6, 16-18, and found that far from rejecting the practice, Matthew deals with it as part of a re-evaluation of certain Jewish pious activities in the light of the new Christian reality. We now come to deal with the question about fasting as it is found in Mt. 9, 14-17 and parallels Mk. 2, 18-22 and Lk. 5, 33-39.

As it is found in Mark, the section is clearly a pronouncement story, or "a short narrative in which everything is subordinated to the desire to give a saying of Jesus which was of interest or importance to the earliest Christian communities."² The distinctive feature of these stories is that they are popular in origin rather than personal narratives communicated by eye-witnesses. In other words, these stories as we have them are rooted in the oral traditions about Jesus which were handed down within the early community. Since the main preoccupation was to preserve and pass on a central saying, any elements which were not part of this core and essential to it, were subject to a great deal of development in the course of transmission. Thus Lightfoot notes that "the majority of the stories in St. Mark contain as their chief and usually central feature a notable saying of the Lord, and it is worthy of note that St. Matthew and St. Luke, although in their use of Markan material of this kind they are apt to treat the introductions and conclusions of the sections with considerable freedom, usually they follow Mark closely in the central feature".³

This particular pronouncement story falls clearly into position as part of the section Mk. 2, 1-3, 6. According to Albertz⁴ the section consists of a number of conflict stories, the purpose of which is to show the need for Jesus' death by means of a consideration of the opposition he encounters during his ministry. The stories are not at all concrete in setting, the questioners being usually anonymous, or the typical Pharisees. Daube⁵ describes them as the direct dramatic presentation of revolutionary action, an action which provokes a protest and which leads to the ultimate silencing of the remonstrants. By placing a revolutionary action at the beginning of the conflict story, emphasis is placed on the novel, startling nature of the kingdom of God. The action itself is invariably one performed on a single, definite occasion: "the general ideas first become reality in, and will always

¹ *Scripture*, January 1967.

² V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*. P. 78.

³ R. H. Lightfoot, *The gospel message of St. Mark*. p. 28.

⁴ M. Albertz, *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche*, p. 5.

⁵ D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*. p. 172.

receive their ultimate sanction from deeds done by Jesus and his followers at particular moments of their activity". Further, the action involved is always an action in the narrow sense, never a statement. The middle part of the form, the protest, sometimes consists in a direct accusation, and sometimes in a challenge to justify the objectionable conduct. In both cases the objectors assume that Jesus and his followers ought to behave as they themselves behave: it is because they are judged to belong to the same camp as the remonstrants that their conduct appears revolutionary. Finally, Jesus justifies his conduct by adducing a piece of teaching—the pronouncement—which his opponents recognise as valid, and thus brings about their defeat on their own ground.

It can readily be seen how well our section falls into this conflict story pattern. The revolutionary action is the fact that the disciples of Jesus do not fast as do other pious groups in Judaism, the disciples of John and those of the Pharisees. The question posed is not a general one "Do you think your disciples should fast or not?", but the particular "these others are fasting, why do your disciples not fast?" It is a particular action which is in question, that of fasting or not fasting on a particular occasion. The protest on this occasion is a challenge to explain the behaviour of the disciples, who are considered to come under the same canons of conduct as those whose action is brought forward as their reproach. Finally, the action is justified by the statement that the companions of the bridegroom cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them.

There can therefore be no doubt that our text belongs to this particular form of gospel pronouncement, the conflict story. What consequences does this conclusion involve for our understanding of the text? Albertz holds that the core of the conflict tradition must be accepted in all cases as historically reliable. This is the more clear when we consider, as Lightfoot points out, that the conflict stories are also gospel stories for each contains some great saying of the Lord which has a vital bearing on the content of the gospel message.¹ Thus, having considered the particular literary form of the pericope, it seems clear enough that while the introductory or concluding elements may have been formed for such reasons as their catechetical or liturgical value during the process of the transmission of the central saying, the saying itself is of assured value, and may be considered to have the very minimum of additions arising out of its tradition or redaction.

¹ Op. cit. p. 29.

In this particular case, however, there is a further difficulty. The precise extent of this "central core" of the pericope is not by any means certain. An imposing array of authors considers that Mk. 2, 19b-20 is not original, being an addition to the basic saying, added in order to justify the fasting practice of the early Church. Dibelius, for instance, considers that this part of the saying as we have it cannot be original. First of all, on grounds of style, the idea of the bridegroom's being separated from his friends doesn't fit into the joyous picture given by the first part of the saying; and secondly the basing of a Christian fast on a passion saying could only come from representatives of this practice. While he maintains that a verbal reconstruction of Jesus' answer is impossible, he considers that the meaning is quite clear; Jesus points out the difference between his disciples and those of the Baptist: there can be no question of his disciples fasting, as the kingdom has arrived for them already, while it hasn't come for those of the Baptist's circle. The second half of the saying arose from the need of the preacher to justify the Christian practice of fasting when told of Jesus' own rejection of the practice. This he did with ancient unscrupulousness by putting the saying in the mouth of Jesus himself.¹

B.T.D. Smith considers that the proverbs and aphorisms in which a general rule is stated in the form of particular instances or applications of that rule are naturally the simplest in structure. He regards this text as an example of the *mashal* in what is probably its most primitive form—"Can the sons of the bridechamber fast while the bridegroom is with them?" Authenticity cannot be claimed for the text in its present form, for this would presuppose the conception of Christ as the heavenly bridegroom, and the fasts of the Christian Church. And he adds that if Mk. 2, 19b be deleted, we are left with a *mashal* to which no objection can be taken on critical grounds.² Taking the same viewpoint even further, Dodd³ considers that "the great merit of Julicher in his work *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* was that he applied a thoroughgoing criticism to this method (of allegorical interpretation) and showed, not that allegorical interpretation is in this or that case overdone or fanciful, but that the parables in general do not admit of that method at all, and that the attempts of the evangelists themselves to apply it rest on a misunderstanding".

In other words a great many, we might even say the majority, of authors is uneasy with the second part of the pronouncement with which we are concerned. It brings in a preoccupation with fasting which it is felt can only be explained in terms of the concern of the

¹ M. Dibelius, *Die urchristliche Ueberlieferung von Johannes dem Täufer*. Gottingen, 1911.

² B. T. D. Smith, *The parables of the synoptic gospels*. p. 30.

³ C. H. Dodd, *The parables of the Kingdom*. p. 14.

early Christian community with the practice; it also involves an allegorisation of the bridegroom concept, which it is felt cannot come from Jesus himself, but can only spring from the later community. V. 20 seems contrary to the spirit of v. 19a, which fits very well into the category of primitive sayings after the fashion of the *marshal* or proverb. And since v. 19b is closely connected to v. 20 by the allegory which runs through them both, it would appear that v. 19b also is an addition. Further, the allusion to the passion in vv. 19b-20, which is unmistakable when these verses are taken allegorically, would seem to stand too early in the gospel: it is best explained as a vaticinium *ex eventu* added by the early Church. Finally, the words "in that day" seem to be a reference to Christian fasting as practised in the post-Resurrection community, for the Pascha, an annual commemoration of the Resurrection with a fast immediately preceding, was probably already in use in the Christian community when Mark wrote. Probably the earliest usage, it is argued, was of a one-day fast, which explains the saying in Mark.

On the other hand, O. Cullmann¹ considers that the second part of our saying is authentic, and is in fact evidence which shows that Jesus did not consider that his death was to coincide with the fulfilment of the reign of God, but that he foresaw an interval, whether long or short, the time for building up the Church.

A solution of this question will emerge in the course of this article. But first of all we must deal with two preliminary questions. The first of these concerns the nature of the occasion, according to the Markan text as it now stands, on which the encounter described is said to have taken place. According to v. 18a the occasion is one on which the disciples of John and those of the Pharisees were fasting. It is of some importance whether *ēsan nēsteuontes* refers to an official fast day or only to a voluntary, private fast undertaken by these two groups of people. For our interpretation of this involves also the precise meaning of the two uses of *nēsteuousin* in v. 18b. Do these mean "they are not fasting now" or "they do not fast"—as a matter of principle? If the *ēsan nēsteuontes* of v. 18a and the first use of *nēsteuousin* of v. 18b are taken as meaning a voluntary, private fast, then so also will the second usage of *nēsteuousin* in the question, and this in turn will modify our approach to the meaning of *mē dunantai nēsteuein* of v. 19. For if the occasion in question is that of a fast day for the whole people, Jesus' rejection of fasting on such an occasion would clearly involve a rejection of the practice in principle, as inconsistent with his presence among them. However, if there is question only of a fast being kept

¹ O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, p. 61.

by some groups independently of the general fasting laws, then his reply at least remains open to another interpretation—it could for example be taken as an *argumentum ad hominem*, which contrasts the joy of his disciples with that of the members of the other two groups.

It seems clear to us that this is not seen by Mark as an occasion on which the whole people is expected to fast. The singling out of the Pharisees and John's disciples seems to indicate that we are here dealing with a reflection of a custom followed by certain pious Pharisees of fasting on Monday and Thursday as a special act of piety (cf. Luke 18,12; *Didache* 8,1). The whole atmosphere here seems to be that of people asking Jesus why his disciples do not "do something extra" as do other pious people. Luke's addition—he doesn't say merely "fast" but "fast often and offer prayers"—shows that he so understood the text.¹ As Bonnard puts it, it is more likely that Jesus and the disciples fast, though not to the extent of the rigorous fasters of the time². There is furthermore the text of Matthew 6,16ff., where the usage of fasting is taken quite for granted by Jesus as an exercise of piety. If it had been totally rejected by Jesus in his lifetime for his disciples, to such an extent that he would not allow them to join in the official fast days, such an instruction as that of Mt 6,16ff., would scarcely have been transmitted within the gospel tradition. We feel quite certain therefore that the occasion of the controversy as described by Mark in our text can only have been one of a voluntary fast of certain groups, which the disciples of Jesus are not keeping. This being so, whatever the sense of v. 19, we are not compelled by the meaning of v. 18 to take it as an assertion that the disciples of Jesus can never fast while he is with them.

We may now ask the question, what is the original reference of the introductory verse in Mark? Can we decide whether the reference to the disciples of John is original to the narrative, or that to the disciples of the Pharisees, or both?

The inclusion of a reference to the disciples of John in this place seems at first sight to be uncalled for. As we have pointed out above, our pericope forms part of a general context of conflict stories. Now in all the other stories in this general section, we find that it is the Pharisees or the scribes or the peculiar "scribes of the Pharisees" who object to the actions of Jesus and his followers, and in the conclusion of the whole section it is the Pharisees who conspire with the Herodians to get rid of Jesus. Why then are the disciples of John brought in with the Pharisees in this text?

¹ Luke 5, 33.

² P. Bonnard, *L'évangile s. Saint Matthieu*, ad loc.

We may first of all admit that there seems to be no question for Mark of these two groups themselves coming and asking the question. *Erchousin kai legousin* are best explained as impersonal plurals, "the question is asked"¹ a Markan idiom which is missed by both Matthew and Luke. Our query here is only as regards the degree of originality of the reference to them as found in the text. Have we any real basis for saying that the reference to both groups goes back to a question originally put to Jesus, or is it more likely that one or both have been inserted by the tradition or the redactor to serve their own purposes? As we have already pointed out, it is not unlikely that in the peripheral parts of the pronouncement story there will be a good deal of variation.

On balance it seems to us that the reference to the disciples of John is more likely to have constituted the original form of the question as it was put to Jesus. If it were merely a matter of the tradition or the redactor having to compose a setting for the pronouncement story, it seems likely that they would have been content with the Pharisees or the scribes, without bringing in another, and an unusual group. If however the story in its primitive form already contained a reference to the disciple of John, it would be surprising if this had not been retained, while the addition of the Pharisees can easily be understood as an attempt to make the series of pronouncement stories homogeneous². For the series is concerned with the mounting opposition of the ruling circles to Jesus, and the mention of the disciples of John strikes a jarring note within this pattern. As Dibelius puts it, it would appear that the Pharisees were brought in to make the text fit more easily into the anti-hierarchical section of which it forms part.

Another indication that the reference to the Pharisees is not original is to be found in the presence of the verses 21-22. Dibelius suggests³ that the two likenesses found in these two verses did not originally belong in this place, as they deal with the danger which the coming of the new brings to the old, a sense which is foreign to the pattern of the pericope. Similarly, Taylor argues that they probably had a prior independent existence, since they form a unit in themselves, and because the principle implicit in them is more radical than a question about a pious custom would warrant⁴. This argument appears to us essentially sound. But the question still remains as to when these two verses came to be part of the pericope as we have it. In other words, are they due to Mark, or to a prior author who bound together the conflict stories prior to the formation of Mark's gospel as we have it?

¹ J. M. Creed, *The gospel according to St. Luke*. p. 82.

² J. Dupont, *Les Béatitudes*, 1st. ed. p. 25.

³ M. Dibelius, *op. cit.*

⁴ V. Taylor, *op. cit.*, ad loc.

It appears to us that there are two possible explanations of the presence of these verses in this place: Either they have been brought in to counteract the preceding verse, which apparently surrenders to a degree to the challenge of the opponents of Jesus, or their original place is after v. 19, in which case their sense would blend admirably with that of v. 19, and of the whole pericope, and v. 20 is a later insertion. Or the whole pericope as we now have it has come down unbroken from the earliest tradition. This latter does not seem to us at all likely. They are self contained to a degree, and it is very likely that they originally had an independent existence. On balance it seems more likely that these verses owe their place here to Mark rather than to the compiler of the pre-Markan conflict series. These verses are out of character in such a series, which is essentially one of actions, reported at some length, and refuted briefly. The breaking of this series by a pair of proverb-like sayings is more likely in the case of Mark, who was writing a gospel which involved not merely a series of accusations to be refuted, but also and much more so, the demonstration that such conflicts arose from an opposition which lay much deeper in the very nature of the new reality brought by and personified in Jesus, and that represented by and personified in his adversaries. The evangelist would be more likely to have added these verses, as he would probably have seen them as the expression of the underlying principles involved in the gospel he was writing.

Having come to this conclusion, it seems much more likely that the reference to the Pharisees in v. 18 is more likely to be due to Mark than to a source prior to him. For it acts as a parallel to the general principle stated in vv. 21-22. The Pharisees would leap much more readily to mind than would the disciple of John in any discussion of the relationship of the new and the old in the context of the Christian gospel. If the reference to John's disciples is original, as we have concluded, the extra reference to another group can be much more easily understood if we take it that it is appended as a parallel to the closing verses of the pericope.

It is our view therefore that both the reference to the Pharisees in v. 18 and the sayings of vv. 21-22 have been added by Mark, the former being a purely redactional touch, and the latter having previously existed in a separate tradition, and being inserted here by the evangelist as a means of bringing out the meaning which lay behind the incidents of the tradition he was using. To this extent at least we have come closer to finding the original core of the narrative. We now have to consider in greater detail the place of Mark 2,19b-20 in the pericope. We have already pointed out that it is by far the most

common view that these verses are a vaticinium ex eventu added to the text by the post-Resurrection community when the practice of fasting had been adopted by it.

Recently H. J. Ebeling¹ has put forward the view that neither the interpretation of Mark 2,18-22 which sees in it as it stands a witness to a real event in the life of Jesus, nor that of essentially Wellhausenian research that it constitutes the community's attempt to justify itself for fasting whereas Jesus did not is satisfactory. As regards the interpretation of the text as the community's self-justification, Ebeling considers the most likely historical probability to be that Jesus in fact fasted. Hence there would be no need for the community to justify itself for reversing the attitude held by Jesus. He further argues that the community itself did not fast, since the justification of the disciples which we have in the text implies and includes a justification of the community, for not fasting. In addition he argues that the addition of vv. 21-22 shows that the community did not fast, for otherwise their affirmation of the incompatibility of the old and the new would be senseless.

On the other hand, according to Ebeling, the text cannot be a witness to a real occasion in the life of Jesus. For the interpretation of the mention of the bridegroom as a revelation of the death of Jesus is contrary to the Markan emphasis on the Messianic secret; and to accept this identification of the bridegroom with Jesus is to deny the radicalism of Jesus' answer. For Jesus doesn't merely attack the legalism involved in the fasting custom, but the whole of the old order. Fasting here is not an expression of penance and worship, but of the misery of separation from the Messiah, and is seen as a practice which only belongs in a time of such separation.

He goes on to give his own view. Arguing that Wellhausen's dictum that "tradition material is also community material" has not been sufficiently taken into account in the interpretation of this pericope. He quotes Bultmann—"the community had broken with the old customs, and was defending its position against its opponents by appealing to an utterance of Jesus", and goes on to affirm that the only satisfactory interpretation of the text sees in it, as do Wellhausen and his followers, a community creation, but one resting on and arising out of a different situation than that postulated by the form critics. It is the creation of a community which knows itself to be in the presence of the Lord, and which therefore cannot fast, but which expects a future time of separation from the Lord—the time of the last woes. In support of this he argues that the expressions "days will

¹ H. J. Ebeling, 'Die Fastenfrage', In *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, 1937-8. p. 387.

come" and "in that day" are technical terms of eschatology, and quotes a phrase from the Testament of the XII Patriarchs: *aristatai ho kurios kai kurieusei ho bēliar*—as supporting the reference of the text to the end time, when God will hand over power to the demonic forces.

This does not appear a very satisfactory solution, however. As Schaefer¹ points out, the New Testament generally excludes an abandonment of the Church by Christ at the end time—cf. Mt. 13, II par., Rom. 8,35-39, John 14,18-21. Further this conception of the absence of the Messiah at the time of the Messianic woes is not found anywhere in late Judaism, and certainly not in primitive Christianity². And the passage quoted from Test. XII Patr. does not deal with the eschatological absence of the *kurios* or *pneuma*, but with the consequences of sin in the life of the individual³. Also, it cannot be maintained that the early community did not fast. Certainly the evidence for fasting in the New Testament is not as extensive as in contemporary Judaism, but it is present, Ac. 13,2-3 has a passing reference to the practice, and for that very reason is a very strong indication that fasting was taken for granted together with community worship. Ac. 14,23 makes the same point. Ebeling's attempt, however praiseworthy it may be for coming to grips with and admitting the difficulties of the text, in the end helps us little in the interpretation of it.

A more likely solution to the problems presented by the text is that of Schaefer.⁴ Commencing with a review of the earliest post-New Testament references to fasting, he argues that in the beginning the Christian writers did not use our text as a justification for Christian fasting. He points out that the earliest known Christian fasts were on Wednesday and Friday; if they had been based on our text as a reference to the passion, he considers that a fast on one day of the week only, and that a Friday, would have been more likely to arise; or if two days had been decided on, Friday and Saturday would have been the obvious ones. But Saturday fasting was only accepted in 3rd century Rome, and even then was much opposed. Fasting first of all appears as a continuation of the Jewish Monday and Thursday fasts, though on different days to make the necessary distinction clear. According to Tertullian, the breaking of the Station fast is justified by the prayer of Peter and John at the same hour (Ac. 3,1), not by a

¹ K. Schaefer, ". . . und dann werden sie fasten, am jenem Tage" in *Synoptische Studien* (Festschrift Wikenhauser).

² cf. W. G. Kummel, *Promise and Fulfilment*, p. 76.

³ Kummel, op cit., p. 76, n. 189.

⁴ art. cit.

reference to the passion. Tertullian adds the latter justification, but makes it clear that this is his own, and not the traditional justification.

Schaefer furthermore considers that the reference to the bridegroom must be taken as allegorical throughout the passage. He argues that *apairēsthai* has not got the sense of a violent death, that in fact it merely expresses the opposite of *met' autōn einai* of 2,19, and that if Mark had understood it as a passion saying he would have placed it after 8,27, where the teaching on the passion begins. The usage *hotan aparthē* itself does not refer to the foregoing *hēmerai*, but since in Koine there is the possibility of the relative use of times, the aorist subjunctive here has the meaning of a *futurum exactum*, i.e., there is question of the time after the removal of the bridegroom.

Most of the problems raised by the form critics disappear. The saying as it stands is original, the reference to the bridegroom is merely metaphorical, and allegory begins only in 2,20. There is no reference to a violent death nor is there a passion prophecy. *Nēsteuein* must be taken to mean not so much a penitential fasting practice in memory of the Lord's death, as expressive of sadness only, in contrast to the joy which prevails in the presence of the bridegroom. In other words we have here a likeness from everyday life, whose underlying idea is that it is not eating or drinking which matters, but the presence or absence of the bridegroom. The answer therefore abstracts altogether from the question of fasting.

This explanation is an attractive one, but as it stands it seems to us to do less than justice to the text. We agree entirely that *hotan aparthē* can only refer to the time after the departure of the bridegroom, and not to the actual day of his departure and there is no *explicit* reference to the passion. But it seems certain that at least an implicit reference to the death of Jesus cannot be excluded from the text.¹

What is to be said of Schaefer's attribution of a metaphorical meaning to *nēsteuein* in v. 20, and his solution thereby of all the difficulties of the text? One is reluctant to accept that a word which in its usage elsewhere in the New Testament, and in the preceding verse of this particular text, clearly means fasting in its normal sense, can be taken in this one place to have a merely metaphorical meaning merely because to do so is to find that certain difficulties of interpretation disappear. If we are to retain objectivity in our approach, should we not attribute the same meaning to the word each time it appears?

¹ J. Jeremias, *The parables of Jesus*, p. 155 n. 1 "Certain passages are stylised *ex eventu*. But on the other hand one can say with great historical probability that Jesus expected violent death".

Yet Schaefer undoubtedly has much on his side. If *nēsteuein* can be taken in a broader sense here the difficulties of the text practically disappear. V.20 need not be taken as amounting to a capitulation to the original challenge, something that does not fit in well with the form of the conflict story. "When the bridegroom is taken away" can be taken in its full sense as referring to Jesus himself at least in v. 20¹. Finally the passage could then fit in very well with the conflict story series, in that it uses an occasion given by adversaries' questions or behaviour to show that Jesus has brought something radically new into the world.²

Is there any objective justification for attributing a metaphorical sense to *nēsteuein* here? It seems clear to us that the whole argument stands or falls by this one point. And in the sense of a radical hard and fast distinction between a literal use of the word in v. 18 and a metaphorical use in v. 19, there is not. But the question may be approached somewhat differently. While *nēsteuein* may not be taken in an entirely different sense in vv. 19-20 merely to solve the problems to which it gives rise when taken literally, an alternative possibility is available. For there is question here of variant translations of a basic Aramaic word, *it'nei*, which means both to be sad (cf. Tg. IKg. 2,26) and to fast (cf. Tg. Sach. 7,5).³

Given this Aramaic background, there is no question of bringing in an unfamiliar and totally different meaning of a word just because it suits our context. The same Aramaic concept is translated by both *penthein* and *nēsteuein*; whichever one of them is used in a particular context will at least implicitly include in its range of meaning that which is expressed explicitly by the other. The particular aspect of the range of meanings possessed by a word which is uppermost is determined by the context. Tone of voice and expression also contribute in the case of the spoken word; however, in a purely literary situation we can only judge by the context. If the context of this particular text indicates that in vv. 19-20 it is most satisfactory, and solves most problems to see as uppermost in the word *nēsteuein* a meaning which is normally outweighed by another, related meaning, there is every justification for accepting that meaning as that of the text.

That this is so is supported by the parallel text in Matthew 9,15, where he changes *nēsteuein* to *penthein* in one instance, yet leaves

¹ cf. Kummel, *op. cit.*, p. 57 " . . . Jesus is here making an affirmation about himself in terms which veil his meaning, and which perhaps first grew out of the picture of the Messianic marriage feast."

² Schaefer, *art. cit.*

³ Jeremias, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum N.T.*, IV, 1096 n. 41.

nēsteuein unchanged where it appears both before and after. This is a very strong indication that all through he was thinking of the text in terms of the aspect expressed by *penthein*, for otherwise he could scarcely slip so easily into the use of the word.

Once we accept this, we have no serious difficulty in accepting the whole of the text as authentic.

The second part does not now amount to a contradiction of the first in that it does not represent a concession to the adversaries which vv. 18-19 and the conflict story form would appear to exclude. "When the bridegroom is taken away" can be taken to mean the time after the death and resurrection without involving us in saying that Jesus commands his followers to fast after his death, something considered by many commentators, and not without reason, as most unlikely.

It does not, it seems to us, solve the problem raised by the apparent passion prophecy contained in the text, but it points the way to a solution. Many commentators, especially Bultmann and those of his school, consider that there is here in v. 20 an explicit prophecy of the passion; that such a prophecy could not have come from Jesus himself, and that it is therefore a prophecy *ex eventu*, to justify *post factum* a practice of fasting in the Christian community. Now as Ebeling points out, the early Church did not justify its fasting by reference to this text, and so it would appear unlikely that it was invented with this purpose in mind. If we take it that the primary reference of the text is not to fasting as an exercise at all, but to the sadness which will undoubtedly follow the removal of the bridegroom, there seems no reason at all why the community should invent such a saying. It seems far more reasonable to see in the text, not an explicit passion prophecy (*ex eventu* or not at all), but a legitimate extension of the bridegroom metaphor to imply sadness in a time when the bridegroom is taken away, in order all the more to emphasise the joy of his presence.

There is no need to press the matter and to insist that Jesus here is using the bridegroom concept as an allegorical term for himself. We may agree with Jeremias¹ that "the allegory of the bridegroom for the Messiah is foreign to the Old Testament and late Judaism. The hearers of Jesus could only with difficulty apply the term bridegroom to the Messiah." But here we are dealing with the use by Jesus of a festive image. The image of Marriage and the marriage feast already had a clear religious sense in Judaism. Everything good that God can give his people is put together in the wedding image. This is a joyful time, because the fulfilment, the Messiah is here. This remains true

¹ Parables, p. 39.

even if the bridegroom concept itself is not an allegorical expression for the Messiah¹.

This also solves for us the problem of the disaccord with the plan of Mark's gospel which a passion prophecy in this place would involve. It is not in fact a passion prophecy, but an extension of the wedding metaphor to bring to mind the sadness involved in the absence of the bridegroom; a consciousness of the death which lies ahead undoubtedly lies behind it, but not a prophecy.²

Once we grant that *nésteuein* in v. 19b-20 has a meaning which emphasises the idea of sadness more than a practice of fasting, the difficulty brought about by the apparent concession to his adversaries by Jesus in these verses disappears. This is a very real difficulty, and demands explanation. As was pointed out earlier, this text comes as part of a series of conflict stories and a priori at least will be expected to share the form of these stories. Now the conflict story form builds up to a climax which consists in the discomfiture of the adversary; any suggestion of compromise with them would involve a change in the form and would suggest a later development in the text. But if we take *nésteuein* in this sense there will be no suggestion of a concession or a capitulation to the adversaries. Jesus merely points out the sadness which can be expected to arise when he has gone, as a means of emphasising the joy of his presence.

Furthermore, no difficulty remains with regard to vv. 21-22. These verses affirm the contrast between the old order and the new, and would seem out of place and difficult to understand if v. 20 is taken to mean a concession to the question asked by the adversaries in v. 18. The structural difficulty would remain even if vv. 19b-20 were regarded as a community addition. But when vv. 19b-20 are taken as a reference to the sadness involved in the absence of Jesus, as a means of underlining the joy effected by his presence, vv. 21-22 can be readily understood as emphasising this new state of affairs which Jesus has brought about.

We have therefore no difficulty now in delineating the "central core" of the text. It covers the whole of vv. 19-20, and the efforts of the form critics to find a credible point of division between the "original saying" and the Church's expansion of it, are unnecessary.

¹ Gnllka, *Die Verstockung Israels* p. 72, mentions that while "bridegroom" is not found as a term for the Messiah in late Judaism, the days of the Messiah are compared to a wedding feast in Rabbinic writings.

² J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 22, notes with justice that "between the false alternatives of 'just general truths' or 'explicit claims to Messianic titles', there lies in Jesus' ministry a whole area of eschatological action accompanied by theological commentary . . .".

From what we have said it will be clear that the purpose of this text is not to give a basic pronouncement about fasting, whether for or against. Rather, Jesus uses the occasion provided by his adversaries' question to make a pronouncement concerning the nature of the new reality which he has brought into the world. It is a time of joy, in which those who are immediately concerned and involved cannot fast; it will be time enough for them to be sad when he is no longer with them. This of course is not to say that Jesus either condemned fasting or prescribed it for the time after his death—he accepted it as something which was done, and left the way open for his followers to use it when occasion demanded.

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