

DO YOU PREFER NEW WINE?

by DAVID FLUSSER*

The following remarks are based on three criteria:

- a. The observation of Robert L. Lindsey¹ that the synoptic material, as preserved in Luke, was rewritten by Mark and that Matthew depends on Mark;
- b. The importance of contemporaneous Judaism for the interpretation of the Gospels;
- c. The simple truth that old wine is better than new wine.

This truth should be taken into account in the exegesis of Jesus' words about fasting, contained in Mark 2:18-22; Mt 9:14-17 and Luke 5:33-39. We do not want to deal here with the authenticity of Jesus' words about the bridegroom in Mk. 2:19-20 and parr., though we do not deny their probable originality. The question of their meaning is independent of the right interpretation of the two comparisons used by Jesus in this passage.

Here is the passage according to Luke 5:33-39:

“They said to him, ‘John’s disciples are much given to fasting . . .² and so are the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink’. Jesus replied: ‘ . . . No one tears a piece from a new cloak to patch an old one; if he does, he will have made a hole in the new cloak and the patch from the new will not match the old. Nor does anyone put new wine into

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1. Robert Lisle Lindsey. *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark*, Jerusalem 1973.
2. Here is a Lucan addition: “and the practice of prayer.” Luke always likes to speak about prayer.

old wine-skins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will be wasted, and the skins ruined. Fresh skins for new wine! And no one after drinking old wine wants new; for he says, 'The old wine is good.' ”

We brought the passage in the translation of the New English Bible, which is even less Semitic than the Greek original. The passage itself in all the three Synoptic gospels is written to a large extent in Greek style and, therefore, it is impossible to reconstruct faithfully the original Hebrew wording. Mark is even more remote from the Hebrew than the other two gospels and, if the passage in Matthew is the simplest of the three, it is impossible to know, if it was rewritten to a lesser extent, or if its author, on his part, had simplified the style. One thing is evident: the passage was already changed by a Greek redactor, before it became known to the evangelists, who tried, from their part, to embellish the descriptions of the passage. In all three gospels the original simplicity is lost.

What is the meaning of the two comparisons, that of patches and that of wineskins? The common opinion is³ that “the sentiments they express are revolutionary, since they affirm that a new message must find a fresh vehicle, if it is not to perish and to destroy existing institutions.” But, in order to reach this conclusion, one has to sever these two sayings from the context, namely from the question of fasting, and one has simply to prefer new wine to old. Luke (5:39) is right when he says that nobody who used to drink⁴ old wine wants new, because the old wine is good. If you do not consider this verse as a Lucan addition, as was done e.g. by Marcion, and – even after such a decision – if you believe that the two sayings speak about the new Christian message, you have no choice other than to interpret Lk. 5:39 in a forcible way⁵: “while the first two (parables) show how fatal it would be to couple the new spirit of the Gospel with the worn out forms of Judaism, the third shows how natural it is that those who have been brought up under these forms should be unwilling to abandon them for something untried.” This was also the understanding of some old witnesses: if a man was brought up in Judaism, he need time in order to abandon it. They introduced into Lk. 5:39 the explication “immediately”, admitting that “nobody who used to drink old wine wants immediately the new”, and so it was written also in the text used by the author of the Gospel of Thomas (logion 47). But why should Jesus, the “glutton and drinker” (Mt. 11:9), who knew the value of an old wine, have used a simile, according to which the new wine is better than old? Such an unnatural comparison does not fit the way in which Jesus explained his doctrines.

I do not remember that Jesus asserted in any of his sayings that his doctrine was a new one, in opposition to the old teaching of Judaism which belonged to the past, though I do not deny that he wanted to rediscover the original meaning of the Law.

3. V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, London, 1957, p. 212.

4. This is the meaning of the Hebrew participle which is behind the Greek translation.

5. A. Plummer, *Gospel According to S. Luke*, ICC, p. 164-5. See also the other explanations there.

It is true that there are New Testament passages, in which the new content of Christianity stands in contrast to the old message of Judaism: see Rom. 7:6 and Hebr. 8:13 (cf. Eph. 4:22-24 and Col. 3:9-10). All these passages occur in the second, "Pauline" stratum of Christianity. Now we recognize the reason why the two comparisons of Jesus were misinterpreted: they were understood in the light of a later Christian theological tension with the Jewish heritage. The opinion that the new patch and the new wine symbolize the newness of Christianity is held by the overwhelming majority of interpreters and by the ancient witnesses, who interpolated into Luke 5:39 the word "immediately." It seems that already Mark was a victim of that wrong interpretation, and therefore he omitted the praise of the old wine, which we know from Luke 5:39, because he thought that the sentence was out of place. Matthew depends on Mark. As Matthew was the most widely read gospel, the common knowledge of his version made it easy to accept the wrong interpretation, which also fitted the main trend of Christian thought. In order to stress the originality of Christianity and its superiority over its Jewish roots, one was prepared to prefer the new wine to the old! It would not be easy to know what Jesus himself really had meant, if the positive evaluation of old wine in Luke 5:39 had not been preserved. Also in our text the importance of Luke becomes evident. But even so, we cannot be sure, if Luke himself correctly understood Jesus' words, which he reflects better than Mark. There is even a possibility that the evangelist understood the passage in the same manner as Mark, but was faithful to his source in bringing the concluding sentence as well. In any case, it is clear, that already in Luke the whole passage was rewritten.

Before analyzing our passage, some references in the ancient rabbinic literature regarding wine, as a symbol for the doctrine of Judaism should be considered, e.g. the beautiful comparison in Tractate Soferim XV, 6. In another source⁶ we read: "One does not feel the taste of the wine at the beginning but the longer it grows old in the pitcher, the better it becomes, so also the words of the Torah: the longer they grow old in the body, the better they become". There is also a famous saying of Rabbi Meir⁷ in the "Sayings of the Fathers" (IV, 20): "Look not at the pitcher but at what is in it. There is a new pitcher which is full of old wine and an old pitcher which has not even new wine in it". In both sayings naturally the old wine is the better one and wine symbolizes the Torah, the doctrine of Judaism. As we shall see, this is, in a broader meaning, also the symbolism of Jesus' saying.

As already said, the two comparisons of Jesus fit his teaching and become reasonable only if we do not sever them from the question about fasting and if we accept as original Luke's praise of the old wine. Once Jesus was asked the following question: "John's disciples are much given⁸ to fasting . . . and so are also the disci-

6. *Sifre Ekev*, 48 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 111).

7. The name "Meir" appears only in many quotations of the saying and in the Kaufmann manuscript of the Mishnah. In other manuscripts and in the *ARN* (version b, ed. Schechter, p. 75) the name is lacking, as if the tradent were Rabbi, i.e. Rabbi Judah the Prince.

8. "are much given" (pykna) occurs only in Luke.

ples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” The question touches on the special fast days of John’s disciples and the Pharisees – and not the days of fasting of the Jewish liturgical year, e.g. the biblical Day of Atonement. We only know that “John came, neither eating nor drinking” (Mt. 11:18), but nothing particular about John and his disciples’ fasts. The Pharisees’ fasts must assuredly be those which were observed twice weekly, on Mondays and Thursdays (see Luke 18:12 and Didache 8:1)⁹. It is impossible to know, how many accepted these fasts; even today there are Jews who fast twice a week, but I personally do not know such persons. Jesus and his disciples did not practise this custom, which was introduced in order to bring the people to repent. Repentance is one of the important components of Jewish fasting, and this was surely also one of the aims of the particular fasts of John’s disciples and of the Pharisees. Jesus compared this practice in instituting new fasts with a new patch and new wine. He considered such a reform as basically ineffective. By such an additional innovation the aim, namely, a true, complete repentance could not be reached.

The manner in which Jesus proceeds to stress his point, is most interesting¹⁰. When you cut a piece of cloth from a new cloak to patch an old one, the effect will be a hole in the new cloak. There is no basic difference here between the material of the two: both are cloaks and the new is better than the old. Those who wanted to repair the old cloak intended not only to repair it, but also to use better material. Yet it is precisely this positive quality of the patch, which causes the damage. An innovation often does not help automatically when you want to bring about an artificial harmony between old and new. Did Jesus mean to say that only a complete renewal of Judaism could help? It is clear that according to both comparisons he recognized that the present state of Judaism was far from ideal: he compared it to an old cloak which needed to be repaired and with old wine-skins. Jesus’ appreciation did not differ from that of critics of all times.

In the second comparison the picture changes. The things that are compared, the skins and the wine, are no longer of the same material. The common aspect of the two comparisons is that one thing is old and the other is new. But in the second simile another couple also appears: the new and the old wine.¹¹ Here also the contrast between the old and the new appears, but contrary to the two cloaks in the first comparison, the old wine is better than the new. With this second couple the scope has changed. According to the first comparison it seems that Jesus approved the

9. See S. Lowy, *The Confutation of Judaism in the Epistle of Barnabas*, J.J.S. 11, 1960, p. 5-8; A. Buchler, *Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, 1922, repr. New York, 1968, p. 139-140; A. Buchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement*, reprint New York, 1967, pp. 44-244. See also Billerbeck II, p. 241-244, IV, 1, p. 77-114.

10. There are three minor agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark. This shows that Matthew used also here not only Mark, but also an older and more original text, which was elaborated by Luke.

11. This contrast is subjacent to the simile, even if Lk. 5:38 is a secondary addition. Also Rabbi Meir in the Sayings of the Fathers (IV, 20) speaks about old and new wine – and about an old and new pitcher.

innovation of introducing new fasts in order to bring the people to repent, but that he thought, at the same time, that such an innovation could not help. In the second simile Jesus spoke not only about old wine-skins and new wine, but he hinted also to the contrast of the good old wine and the inferior new one. It is probable that this evoked in the minds of his hearers the association of wine as the symbol for doctrine. Even if it was not the main concern of the two comparisons, the institution of new fasts was surely not without connection with doctrinal aspects. In any case, it now becomes clear that the old frail frame cannot be made better by partial innovations, even if the intention is good, but, on the other hand, a new content is worse than the old one.

Does this attitude fit Jesus' attitude? I think that Jesus means, in accordance with the drinker in Luke, that the old wine is better, not only in the verbal meaning, which is beyond doubt, but also in connection with the content of Judaism. We have never seen that the "historical" Jesus intended to bring a new teaching and opposed the old as obsolete. What he wanted was a rediscovery of the original meaning of Judaism and he tried to establish it.

The best expression of Jesus' opinion about Judaism of his days would probably have been, if Jesus had said: "Fresh skins for old wine!" But this would fit only the symbolic meaning of the comparison and not the image itself, taken from the daily life. For an old wine does not need new skins. Jesus has compared the institution of new fasts with new wine; so he pursues the picture and says that new wine needs new wine-skins. The original wording of the sentence is preserved in Mt. 9:17: "one usually puts¹² new wine into fresh skins; then both are preserved." This is the only practical solution to preserve new wine – but no one after drinking old wine wants new, for he rightly says "The old wine is good." Jesus now abandoned the first antithesis "new wine – old skins" and deals with the couple "old and new wine." The old wine is better than the new and those who decline to accept the new know what they are doing. The doctrinal innovations are not only useless but they are also not easily accepted. The contrast between old and new wine in Luke 5:39 reflects Jesus' critique of senseless innovations, which can even cause harm. No doubt that this is the meaning of both comparisons. Lk. 5:39 is an organic part of Jesus' arguments and the sentence was evidently omitted by Mark (and Matthew), because already Mark saw in the comparisons an expression of the

12. This is the meaning of the Hebraism "ballousin." There is a minor agreement between Mt. 9:17 and Luke 5:38 (bleteon) against Mark, where the verb is lacking. The verbal adjective "bleteon" is the only representative of adjectives, ending with "-teos" in the whole New Testament (See Fr. Blass / A. Debrunner / Fr. Rehkopf, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, 1976 65, note 5, p. 52). I venture that the Lucan change from "one usually puts" into "one ought to put" shows that, although Luke (5:39) has preserved the concluding sentence, he made this change because he, too, identified the new wine with the new doctrine of Christianity. If Mark depends on Luke, he thought the words "one ought to put" unnecessary and omitted them. Some witnesses omit the words "but new wine into fresh skins" in Mk. 2:22 (See *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, ed. by B.M. Metzger, London, 1971, p. 79). This omission is evidently secondary.

difference between the new Christian and the old Jewish faith, which could not go together, and not Jesus' answer to the question about fasting. Since this interpretation was hostile to the Jewish heritage, Mark was compelled to ignore the simple fact that old wine is better. No wonder that he was followed by practically all Christian exegetes and thinkers. As soon as you have found in the gospel a further proof-text for the claim that Christianity is excellent and Judaism is obsolete, you are prone to accept in the parable the praise of new wine, even if in your daily life you prefer old wine.

So much for old and new wine. Do the previous words (Luke 5:38 and parr.) about new wine which needs new skins have any significance for Jesus' teaching? He wanted evidently to say that an innovation is only effective when the old frame is changed as well. From the first simile, about the cloak and the new patch it would seem that Jesus advocated such a revolutionary move, especially as he had spoken about old cloak and old wine-skins. But Jesus and his disciples did not accept the new fast, and I cannot detect any sign showing that Jesus wanted to be an innovator. In order to avoid such a false interpretation of his intentions and his attitude, he referred in the second simile to new wine, whose newness is not, as in the case of the new patch, a positive quality. In order to make his point clear, he speaks finally about new and old wine.

If we are prepared to follow the stream of Jesus' images in our passage, we can only admire his art and his pedagogical ability. He could not know that some decades later a new situation would arise, which created a new contrast, that of the old and new faith, a contrast which would cause tension and animosity. This new situation is reflected in the *Didache* 8:1-3¹³: "But do not let your fasts fall on the same day as the hypocrites, who fast on Monday and Thursday. Rather you should fast on Wednesday and Friday. Nor should you pray as the hypocrites do, but pray as the Lord commanded in his gospel . . ." Now, the Christians "are discharged from the law, to serve God in a new way, the way of spirit, in contrast to the old way, the way of a written code" (Rom 7:6). The Christian covenant is the new covenant and the Jewish the old one, "and anything that is growing old and aging will shortly disappear" (Hebr. 8:13). In this atmosphere of the separation of the new faith from the old, our passage was readily interpreted as a praise of the new message and a rejection of the old one. It seems that it occurred already in Mark. So Jesus' words were distorted by this new theology until now. The vested interests became so strong, that, in contrast to their experience as drinkers, the interpreters and theologians were inclined, in their theological reflections, to prefer new wine to old.

13. J.T. Audet, *La Didache*, Paris, 1957, p. 367, is right when he writes about *Didache* 8:1-3: "L'instruction sur le jeûne ne paraît pas la mieux inspirée du recueil. Pour diriger des chrétiens dans les voies de l'évangile, elle ne trouve rien de plus judicieux à leur proposer que le périlleux sentiment de la "séparation," triste présage de ce que l'église allait bientôt obtenir, lorsque la mission auprès d'Israël serait remplacée par la littérature adversus Judaeos."