

## A CRITIQUE OF PURPORTEDLY AUTHENTIC AGRAPHA

William L. Lane\*

The term agrapha designates isolated sayings attributed to Jesus in the tradition, but which are not recorded within the canonical Gospels.<sup>1</sup> In the last quarter of the nineteenth century Alfred Resch<sup>2</sup> and James Hardy Ropes<sup>3</sup> worked meticulously to collect and to critically evaluate a large quantity of agrapha. The subsequent publication of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri between the years 1897-1908 disclosed the existence of early collections of the sayings of Jesus which produced new agrapha (P. Oxy. Nos. 1, 654, and 655). More recently, the discovery in 1945 of the Coptic library at ancient Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt has made available a large quantity of sayings attributed to Jesus which were previously unknown.

From the standpoint of the agrapha, the most important document from Nag Hammadi was the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, which shed surprising light on the nature of the agrapha known from the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. In form, this document is a sayings collection. After a prologue of four and a half lines, which itself contains a saying, the collection preserved 144 sayings, the larger number of which are introduced by the formula "Jesus said." The sayings fall into four categories: (1) those which agree verbatim with statements of Jesus known from the canonical Gospels; (2) those which paraphrase the canonical sayings or represent independent variants to the canonical tradition; (3) those sayings which are unattested in the canonical Gospels but which occur elsewhere in documents and manuscripts from the patristic period; (4) sayings which were previously unknown and which bear a pronounced Encratite or Gnostic stamp.<sup>4</sup> The third category of sayings had particular bearing on the character of the agrapha, for it was observed that the

\*Visiting Professor of Religious Studies, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.

<sup>1</sup>For an introduction to the subject see W. L. Lane, "Agrapha," *Encyclopedia of Christianity* I (1964), pp. 105-112.

<sup>2</sup>A. Resch, *Agrapha: ausserkanonische Evangelienfragmente* (Leipzig, 1889; 2nd edition revised, 1906).

<sup>3</sup>J. H. Ropes, *Die Sprueche Jesu die in den kanonischen Evangelien nicht ueberliefert sind* (Leipzig, 1896); *idem*, "Agrapha," *Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. J. Hastings), Extra Volume (1904), pp. 343-352.

<sup>4</sup>The character of the new material has been debated extensively. For a balanced presentation of the position that a distinction should be made between sayings originating in Encratite Christianity and those originating in Christian Gnosticism, see G. Quispel, "Gnosis and the New Sayings of Jesus," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 38 (1969), pp. 261-269.

Coptic Gospel of Thomas contained the Oxyrhyncus sayings of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> The prologue to the Coptic Gospel of Thomas is provided in Greek by P. Oxy. No. 654. Moreover, the order of the sayings within the Oxyrhyncus fragments is almost identical to that in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. These observations provided evidence that the sayings of Jesus in the Oxyrhyncus Papyri are actually the remains of the Gospel of Thomas in Greek. It is now possible to reconstruct with certainty many of the fragmentary lines of the Greek papyri on the basis of the Coptic text, in spite of recensional differences.<sup>6</sup> The papyrus fragments represent three different copies of this work executed at different times, providing evidence of the popularity of this type of apocryphon in the late second and third centuries.<sup>7</sup> It may be assumed that many of the agrapha currently found as isolated citations in patristic sources were originally drawn from collections of this nature.

The agrapha must be considered in any search for genuine utterances of Jesus beyond the documents of the New Testament. This necessitates an evaluation of a specific agraphon in the attempt to account for its textual form, and to determine its source of origin, meaning, and worth. The task places severe demands upon critical judgment, but is advanced by the adoption of three criteria.

The first criterion is the multiplicity of witnesses which record the same agraphon. When a number of manuscript citations of a purported maxim of Jesus exist, a comparative study of the variants will permit the reconstruction or restoration by conjecture of the primitive form of the text. A study of the context in which the saying is cited may also indicate the tenor of the statement. Yet the question of authenticity cannot be settled by an appeal to multiple attestation. The witnesses must be sorted, and importance may be attached only to those which appear to embody an independent tradition. Several witnesses can, in fact, represent a single line of tradition whose merit may be questionable. In the presence of an isolated agraphon, or of witnesses that reflect a single tradition, critical caution is demanded. This is particularly true when the source is neither

<sup>5</sup>P. Oxy. No. 654 corresponds to the Prologue and sayings 1-5 of Coptic Thomas; P. Oxy. No. 1 corresponds to sayings 27, 28, 29, 30, 31 with the end of 77, 32, 33, 34; and P. Oxy. No. 655 corresponds to Coptic sayings 37, 38, 39, 40.

<sup>6</sup>See J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Oxyrhyncus *Logoi* of Jesus and the Coptic *Gospel according to Thomas*," *Theological Studies* 20 (1959), pp. 505-560, reprinted with additional bibliography in *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Missoula, Mont., 1974), pp. 355-433; G. W. MacRae, "The Gospel of Thomas—*Logia Iesou?*," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 (1960), pp. 56-71; O. Hofius, "Das koptische Thomasevangelium und die Oxyrhyncus Papyri Nr. 1, 654 und 655," *Evangelische Theologie* 20 (1960), pp. 21-42, 182-192; R. A. Kraft, "Oxyrhyncus Papyrus 655 Reconsidered," *Harvard Theological Review* 54 (1961), pp. 253-262; M. Marcovich, "Textual Criticism on the Gospel of Thomas," *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1969), pp. 53-74, all with extensive bibliographical notes.

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas oriented to the question of New Testament agrapha see J. B. Bauer, "De agraphis genuinis Evangelii sec. Thomae coptici," *Verbum Domini* 37 (1959), pp. 129-46; *idem*, "Echte Jesusworte?" in W. C. van Unnik, *Evangelien aus dem Nilstand* (Frankfort am Main, 1960), pp. 108-50; J. E. Ménard, "L'Évangile selon Thomas et le Nouveau Testament," *Studia Montis Regii* 9 (1966), pp. 147-157. Bauer cautiously urged a serious consideration of logion 51, 58, 82, and 102. Ménard finds authentic independent Jesus tradition only in logion 8 (the parable of the dragnet) and logion 82 (on which, see below n. 15).

very ancient nor certain.<sup>8</sup> Adherence to this first criterion will assist the determination of the earliest form of the text, and possibly the meaning of an agraphon.

The second criterion is the authority of each of the independent witnesses which have transcribed a maxim. Authority may be evaluated in terms of the age of a witness, its proximity to early tradition, and particularly the care displayed in transcribing the words of Jesus. A writer who has been careful to record in a reliable fashion the words of Jesus known from the Gospels is more to be trusted when he transcribes an agraphon than one whose apologetic preoccupations permitted him to modify traditional formulations. In the case of an agraphon transmitted as a variant in a New Testament manuscript, the critical value of that manuscript and of the family to which it belongs must be considered. This second criterion focuses attention upon the relative reliability of the literary source for an agraphon.

The third criterion is the degree of agreement of an agraphon with the teaching of Jesus in the canonical Gospels. A maxim which stands in tension with the sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels has little claim to authenticity. On the other hand, conformity to the tenor of evangelical teaching would not guarantee the authenticity of an agraphon. Some agrapha prove to be free citations from memory of passages drawn from the Gospels, or minor interpretive glosses on the words of Jesus. Even when an agraphon conforms to the thought of Jesus but appears to be an interesting and original fragment of gospel tradition, it is difficult to assert with confidence that it is a genuine utterance of Jesus.

These three criteria constitute a basis for forming a cautious estimate of the value of any agraphon. If an agraphon is supported by broad and independent attestation, if the witnesses who cite it had access to early tradition and reflect a concern for faithful transmission of the words of Jesus, and if the tenor of a statement is harmonious with the known teaching of Jesus, without being a timeless platitude, it may be an authentic maxim. Certainty on the point of authenticity is very difficult to attain, and often impossible.

Nevertheless, it has been the considered judgment of representative scholars like A. Resch, J. H. Ropes, and J. Jeremias<sup>9</sup> that several of the agrapha have as great a claim to authenticity as do the sayings of Jesus preserved in the canonical Gospels. Before such a judgment can be seriously entertained, the purportedly authentic agrapha should be made the object of a searching critique.

<sup>8</sup>These remarks are relevant to J. Karawidopulos, "Ein Agraphon in einem liturgischen Text der griechische Kirche," *Zeitschrift fuer die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 662 (1971), pp. 299 f., who has championed the authenticity of a saying attributed to Jesus in post-13th century Greek MSS: "As often as you may fall, rise up and you will be saved." Because it is cited among several known sayings of Jesus, he concludes that the logion was known from tradition as a saying of Jesus. The late date and character of the witnesses, however, render this conclusion improbable.

<sup>9</sup>For Resch and Ropes, see nn. 2-3. J. Jeremias' authoritative study, *Unbekannte Jesusworte* (Zurich, 1948), has now reached a 3rd revised edition in German (Guetersloh, 1963), which was translated by R. H. Fuller as the 2nd edition of *Unknown Sayings of Jesus* (London, 1964).

Among the agrapha whose authenticity has been judged to be probable are those few sentences which are allied to the genuine sayings of Jesus and which are transmitted by witnesses which do not fail to make an impression, either by their number or their critical value. The rarity of such utterances underscores the interest they properly excite. Within this category is the well-known agraphon, "Be approved money-changers." Resch, Ropes, and Jeremias agree that this maxim is an authentic utterance of Jesus. The admonition is definitely well attested; it is cited some 70 times in the patristic literature. This number is greatly reduced when account is taken of repeated citation by the same author, or when one discounts those witnesses which have copied it from others, or when the late post-fifth century occurrences are discarded. But there are perhaps twelve principal witnesses that remain. No clear echoes of the admonition can be found in the text of the Gospels, however. The closest parallel is Paul's admonition to "test everything; hold fast to what is good" (I Thess. 5:21). In fact, it is exceptional to find the agraphon cited independently; it is almost invariably accompanied by Paul's statement to the Thessalonians. It is this fact which places the origin of the agraphon in question. Although Origen distinguishes the agraphon from Paul's counsel (*Homilies on John* 19, 2), such a distinction was rarely made. Clement of Alexandria fused the two maxims and cited them simply as "Scripture" (*Stromata* I. 28, 177). Dionysius of Alexandria (*apud* Eusebius, *Church History* VII. 7, 3) and Cyril of Alexandria (*Against Nestorius* I. 1; *Commentary on the Gospel of John* IV. 5) also combined the two statements, but attributed them both to Paul. It is difficult, therefore, not to entertain a degree of doubt concerning the authenticity of the agraphon. It may have originated as a gloss on I Thess. 5:21 in the margin of a manuscript. From there it could easily enter a collection of sayings, together with the text it was intended to summarize. This proposal would explain the narrow connection between the two passages as well as the attribution of the "agraphon" both to Jesus and to Paul.

If some agrapha originated as marginal glosses, others appear to owe their origin to the retouching of passages from the Gospels with interpretive amplifications. The following agraphon, which Origen attributes to Jesus (*Selections on the Psalms* 4), seems to fall into this category, although it has been judged to be authentic by Resch, Ropes, and Jeremias: "Seek the great things, and the small things will be added to you; seek the heavenly things, and the earthly will be added to you." These instructions agree with the authentic teaching of Jesus, and display the balanced structure and cadence familiar from many passages in the Gospels. The fact that Origen cites the statement three times (*On Prayer* 2, 14), that Ambrose refers to it as Scripture (*Letters* I, 36, *ad Hor.* 3), and that Eusebius cites one part of the maxim and attributes it to Jesus (*On the Psalms* 16. 2), tends to confirm an initially favorable impression. That impression is challenged, however, by the fact that the first sentence occurs in two different forms in the writings of Clement of Alexandria. In *Stromata* I. 24, 158 it occurs as a citation introduced by the indefinite *phesi*, "he says"; at a later point in the same work it is not introduced as a citation, but as an explanatory comment on Matthew 6:33 (*Strom.* IV. 6, 34). This

second occurrence points to its probable origin. The admonition appears to have been couched in its present form for the instruction of catechumens. In this form it entered collections of sentences of the Lord, from which our earliest witnesses extracted it. The second maxim, which is less well attested, undoubtedly originated in the same manner.

Another agraphon which is purported to be authentic by Resch and Ropes is preserved by the second-century apologist Justin: "Therefore our Lord Jesus Christ said, 'In whatever things I overtake you, in these I will also judge you'" (*Dialogue* 47, 5).<sup>10</sup> This stern warning appears to take account of the certainty of the Lord's return as eschatological Judge. The statement is clearly attributed to Jesus by an early witness to the tradition who usually transcribes the words of Jesus with care. Moreover, it corresponds to other pronouncements of Jesus in the Gospels (e.g. Matt. 24:40-42; 25:13). It is accepted as an expression of Jesus by Cyprian (*Concerning Mortality* 17), the Syriac *Liber Graduum* (49, 26), and pseudo-Amphilochius (*de non Desperando*, preserved by Poussines in his *Thesaurus Asceticus*, 10). Yet an examination of all the witnesses to this logion indicates that its authenticity is problematic. It was very frequently transmitted, without essential variation, by ecclesiastical writers from the second to the fifteenth centuries. The agraphon is nearly always cited as an isolated aphorism appropriate to a general context dealing with penitence or judgment, without any attempt to assign it to a source. Apart from the four witnesses who attribute the statement to Jesus, it is ascribed vaguely to one of the prophets, or specifically to Ezekiel (e.g. John Climacus, or Evagrius' Latin translation of the *Life of Anthony* 15). The prophecy is clearly similar in tenor and expression to Ezekiel 18:30 and 33:20, and may be in fact an adaptation of these passages.<sup>11</sup> A consistently reproduced textual variant suggests that Clement of Alexandria is the source from which most of the other witnesses have derived this agraphon. It is significant, therefore, that Clement adds to the sentence elements which are also found in Ezekiel 7:6. It is difficult to believe that if Jesus had spoken these words, that the source of this frequently repeated warning could have been almost completely forgotten. The readiness to ascribe the statement to one of the prophets is understandable if the primary source of the "agrathon" was a collection of passages drawn from the prophets. The probability is that Justin, or the tradition which he received, was mistaken in assigning the saying to Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

Among the more familiar sayings of Jesus preserved in Oxyrhynchus Papyrus No. 1<sup>13</sup> there is found a startling lament:

<sup>10</sup>On this saying see A. J. Bellinzoni, "The Source of the Agrathon in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* 47, 5," *Vigiliae Christianae* 17 (1963), pp. 65-70; *idem*, "The Sayings of Jesus in the Writings of Justin Martyr," *Supplements to Novum Testamentum* 17 (1967), pp. 131-134; A. Baker, "Justin's Agrathon in the Dialogue with Trypho," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968), pp. 277-287.

<sup>11</sup>Jerome cites the agrathon precisely in his commentary on Ezek. 18:30 (*Corpus Christianorum* 75, p. 245).

<sup>12</sup>A. Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 287, prefers to assign it to an apocryphon such as the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*. He stresses that it is a stylistic device of much apocrypha to attribute dramatic, epigrammatical utterance to the leading characters. When a saying was repeated after the elliptical "he said" it was easy for it to become confused with utterances of Jesus.

<sup>13</sup>P. Oxy. 1:1 = Luke 6:42; Matt. 7:5; 1. 5 = Luke 4:24; 1.6 = Matt. 5:14.

Jesus says: I stood in the midst of the world, and I appeared to them in flesh, and I found them all drunken, and I did not find one among them thirsting, and my soul is pained for the sons of men, for they are blind in their heart and do not see ...

(P. Oxy. 1:3).

In the first edition of his study of the agrapha (1948), Joachim Jeremias sensed in this cry the genuine ring of the voice of Jesus. Particularly important to Jeremias was the apparent allusion to Isaiah 6:9f., a passage which was fundamental to Jesus' understanding of the response to his ministry by his contemporaries, as well as the expression of a love which persists in the presence of rejection. The whole tenor, Jeremias argued, was consistent with the Servant background to the conclusion, which is thoroughly Synoptic in character. It is now known, however, that the Oxyrhynchus fragment preserved only half of the logion, which occurs in its entirety as the 28th saying of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas:

Jesus said: I stood in the midst of the world and I revealed myself to them in flesh. I found them all drunken; I did not find any of them thirsty. My soul was pained for the sons of men, for they are blind in their hearts and do not see that they came into the world empty. They seek further to come forth from the world empty. But now they are drunk. When they set aside their wine, then they will repent.

The logion expresses the cry of the Gnostic Revealer, who reflects upon his incarnation and laments over the spiritual blindness of men. He brought the water of knowledge and life, but found all men intoxicated, having quenched their thirst with emptiness. A close parallel is provided by the words of Hermes, the prophet of God, in the *Corpus Hermeticum* 1. 27:

I have begun to proclaim to men the beauty of piety and knowledge: "Oh you peoples, earth-born men who have given yourselves over to drunkenness and sleep and ignorance of God, sober up and cease to be intoxicated and bewitched by irrational sleep."

The pathetic tone of the saying in Thomas recalls Jesus' lament over Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often I have longed to gather your children around me, as a hen gathers her brood beneath her wing, but you refused!" (Matt. 23:37). In the Coptic saying, however, the lament is softened by the reference to a time of repentance. The statement, far from being Synoptic in character, is thoroughly gnostic.<sup>14</sup>

Are there any extra-canonical agrapha which have a greater claim to authenticity than these which have been examined? There may be, but it is invariably difficult to make a certain pronouncement concerning authenticity. The most noteworthy example is an agraphon preserved by Origen in an exposition of Jeremiah:

I have read somewhere that the Savior said—and I question whether someone has assumed it was the person of the Savior, or called the words to mind, or whether it be true what is said—but at any rate the Savior says there, "He that is near me is near the fire; he that is far

<sup>14</sup>See further B. Gaertner, *The Theology of the Gospel according to Thomas* (New York, 1961), pp. 141-143, 190-194.

from me is far from the kingdom" (*Homilies on Jeremiah* 20. 3).

This agraphon is also recorded by Origen's student, Didymus the Blind (*Homilies on Psalms* 88. 8). The saying may be a genuine utterance of Jesus on the cost of discipleship. It is similar in structure and tone to authentic sayings of Jesus, echoing Mark 9:49; 12:34; and Luke 12:49. It contains the sharp antithesis of which Jesus was particularly fond. Its stern warning concerning the coming tribulation is thoroughly in character with Jesus. On the other hand, the elaborate qualification with which Origen introduces the agraphon indicates that he was himself hesitant about citing the dictum. His hesitation may have arisen from the literary source from which he extracted the logion. The saying has now been found in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas (logion 82), which contains both authentic and inauthentic sayings ascribed to Jesus. If Origen recognized that it came from the Gospel of Thomas, an adequate explanation is provided for the hesitancy with which he introduced the agraphon, for he rejected the Gospel of Thomas as apocryphal (*Homilies on Luke*, on 1:1). He would have been concerned lest his approval of the logion should be understood as approval of the document from which it was drawn. Although the enigmatic tenor of the allusion to persecution and martyrdom in the saying is a strong note in the apocryphal Acts of the second century, there is little reason why this agraphon cannot be authentic.<sup>15</sup> Yet this critique of purportedly authentic agrapha has indicated that there are sober reasons for sustaining a cautious judgment with respect to the authenticity of any non-canonical agraphon.

<sup>15</sup>See now J. B. Bauer, "Das Jesuswort 'Wer mir nahe ist,'" *Theologische Zeitschrift* 15 (1959), pp. 446-450. Bauer argues that there were current in various forms an ancient proverb which described the danger of being near a ruler whose actions were unpredictable. *A priori*, one cannot deny that Jesus could have taken over such a saying and made use of it in his own way. The logion is accepted as authentic by J. Jeremias (E. T.<sup>2</sup>, 1964, pp. 66-73), and J. E. Ménard (n. 7 above), among others.