

Criticism of the Gospels

Part 1: Source and Form Criticism

*Recommended reading:

- Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988.
Marshall, I. Howard. *New Testament Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.
Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible. Methodology of Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian Turned Evangelical*. Trans. Robert Yarbrough. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2001.
Eta Linnemann, *Biblical Criticism on Trial. How Scientific is "Scientific Methodology?"* Trans. Robert Yarbrough. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2001.

I. The nature of the Gospels

- A. The NT canon has 4 accounts of the life of Christ, which we call "Gospels"
1. Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels
 - a. They have a similar order of events, most of the same stories, many of the same sayings of Jesus and many verbal similarities in the way they describe the events.
 - b. They are called "synoptic" because their similarity enables them to be arranged "side-by-side" (*syn-optically*)
 2. John has only an 8% overlap with the Synoptic Gospels
 - a. A very different order of stories and appears to be arranged topically, rather than chronologically.
 - b. He records many teachings of Jesus that are not found in the Synoptic Gospels.
- B. What is a Gospel?
1. The opening to Mark reads "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."
 2. Originally "gospel" (*euaggelion*) and the verb "proclaim the gospel" (*euaggelizomai*) referred to good news that was proclaimed.
 - a. The early Church used "gospel" to refer to the message about Jesus' death and resurrection which brings power for salvation (Rom 1:3-4, 16).
 - b. The purpose of proclamation was to bring faith.
 - c. Luke refers to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom as "proclaiming the good news" (*euaggelizomai*, Luke 8:1; 16:16)
 3. As a written genre, the Gospels appear to be a Christian invention
 - a. They have similarities to "lives of the prophets" and biographies, but they are not the same
 - (1) They are not just for information
 - (2) They are not a complete biography
 - (a) Only Mt and Lk include birth
 - (b) Little about his first 30 years of life
 - (c) Focuses on 3 ½ years of public ministry with about half on the last week of his life
 - (3) They are not trying to idealize a hero
 - b. Gospels are written to bring a person to faith and salvation (Jn 20:31)
 - (1) The stories and sayings were selected carefully to show who Jesus is, and to show the significance of his death and resurrection, and to evoke faith in him.
 - (2) They were writing as evangelists, not historians
 4. However, the fact that they wrote to build faith does not mean that they cannot be trusted as history.
 - a. Luke carefully researched his materials (Luke 1:1-4). He refers to events and people that can be verified from outside sources.
 - b. They are careful to report even things that are not complementary to the heroes of the church (e.g. Peter's denial and the slowness of the disciples to see who Jesus really was)
 - c. No historian is objective. They have a purpose for writing and select material to prove a point.
 - (1) The Jesus Seminar tries to recreate Jesus in a way that is acceptable to their assumptions about what was possible to happen.
 - (2) The Gospel writers should not be criticized as creating an unhistorical Jesus simply because they are writing to build faith.

II. Biblical Criticism

A. “Criticism” refers to analysis of a text; not being negative

B. Lower criticism

1. Text criticism: Reconstructing the wording of the original text (“autograph”) by comparing handwritten manuscripts (MSS)
2. Modern scholars have a high degree of confidence that we know the original text.
 - a. 6000 NT Greek manuscripts
 - b. Modern reconstruction of the text is better than text behind King James Version
 - (1) Only a few late medieval MSS at the time the KJV was translated.
 - (2) Today we have thousands of MSS, including several excellent ones that are very early.
 - (3) This is one reason modern Bible translations are better than KJV and its revisions.
3. Why is textual criticism important?
 - a. If the Bible is the Word of God, we want to know exactly the text of the message.
 - b. Inspiration extends to the very words of Scripture.
 - c. Inerrancy applies to the original autograph, not the copies or translations.

C. Higher criticism

1. Once we know the text, we can ask other questions about how the text originated and developed.
2. Source criticism: What written sources did the author use?
3. Form criticism: How were oral traditions passed along prior to the written records?
4. Redaction criticism: Did the text go through stages of editing (editions) or did the author modify his sources? What is the distinctive theological point of view of the author?
5. The combination of all 3 methods is often called “tradition criticism”

III. The Synoptic Problem and Source Criticism

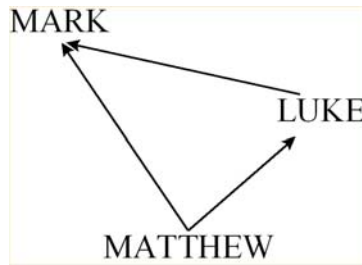
A. The Synoptic Problem explores why there are verbal similarities between the 3 Synoptic Gospels

1. It is not surprising that the Gospels present basically the same stories in a similar order, since the content and basic order is largely controlled by Jesus’ 3 ½ year public ministry.
2. But frequently there is exact verbal agreement between 2 or 3 gospels.
 - a. They often agree in the exact word choice and order in Greek, sometimes even when awkward or unusual constructions are used.
 - b. 80% of Mark’s verses are found in Matthew and 65% in Luke.
3. Yet at other times they are very different or 2 of them are the same and the third is quite different.
4. How do we account for these similarities and differences?
 - a. The agreements are too great for them to be independent, eye-witness testimonies alone (although they each include some of their own perspectives).
 - b. A shared oral background of stories passed around is not sufficient to explain all the agreements.
 - c. Most scholars believe that there is some sort of literary dependence between the Gospels. The Gospel writers relied on 1 or more written sources when they wrote their Gospels.
5. Source criticism tries to determine what written sources the Gospel authors used
6. To say that the Gospel writers used sources is not incompatible with divine inspiration.
 - a. Inspiration does not mean that God dictated the words to the writers.
 - b. They used normal techniques of research: reading existing accounts, using their own notes, possibly existing collections of sayings of Jesus.
 - c. Luke acknowledges that he did this research meticulously (Luke 1:1-4).

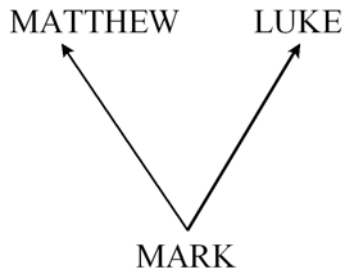
B. History of the question

1. “Pre-critical”:
 - a. Harmonizations (Tatian)
 - b. Matthew priority was most common ancient view until 19th C. (Augustine)

2. Griesbach (1789): Luke used Matthew. Mark used both Matthew and Luke



3. Lachmann (1835): Matthew and Luke both used Mark



4. The Two-Document Hypothesis

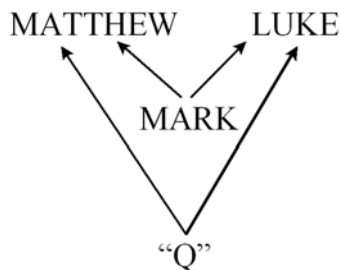
a. Holtzmann (1863)

b. Markan priority: Matthew and Luke used Mark

- (1) Greater probability that Matt and Luke expanded than Mark abbreviated. Why would Mark cut out the Sermon on the Mount if he had Matt in front of him?
- (2) Matt and Luke never agree in their order of events against Mark
- (3) Matt and Luke sometimes seem to improve on the syntax of Mark
- (4) Mark's is the "freshest" reading: breathless telling of the story without polish

c. Another unknown source was shared by Matt and Luke but not used by Mark.

- (1) This is called "Q" after the German word Quelle ("source")
- (2) There are about 220 verses in Matt and Luke that are substantially the same and not in Mark
- (3) Mostly sayings of Jesus and a few narratives (John the Baptist, temptation)
- (4) Some say Q was a written source, others that it was oral (memorized sayings of Jesus, John)

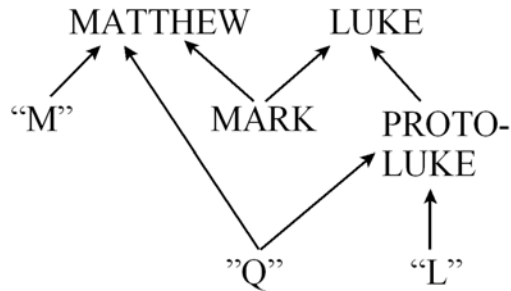


5. The Four-Document Hypothesis

a. Streeter (1924)

- (1) In addition to Mark and Q, 2 more sources:
 - (a) M = Matthews special material
 - (b) L = Luke's special material
- (2) Luke originated in 2 stages:
 - (a) Proto-Luke = L + Q

(b) Final Gospel of Luke added material from Mark

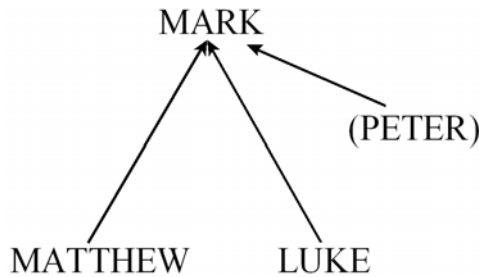


b. Evaluation

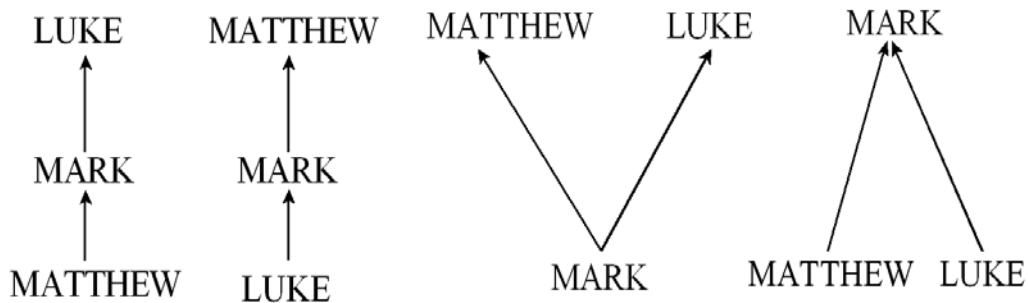
- (1) Unlikely that M existed in written form
- (2) Proto-Luke hypothesis may help to explain the structure of Luke: Blocks of Markan material inserted in the basic structure

6. Recent discussion

- a. Majority view assumes priority of Mark and existence of Q
- b. Some have challenged priority of Mark and argued for Matthew priority (as Augustine)
 - (1) B.C. Butler (*Originality of St. Matthew*, 1951)
 - (a) Mark used Luke and Matthew
 - (b) Where Mark seemed more “primitive”, he is relying on Peter’s teachings.



- (2) L. Vaganay (1954)
 - (a) Aramaic Ur-Matthew was the basic document used by Matt and Mark.
 - (b) Luke drew on Mark and a Sayings Source
- (3) W. Farmer (1968)
 - (a) The shared material only shows that Mark is the middle term. 4 possibilities:
 - i) Luke drew on Matthew who drew on Mark
 - ii) Matthew drew on Luke who drew on Mark
 - iii) Matthew and Luke drew on Mark
 - iv) Mark drew on Matthew and Luke



(b) Returned to Griesbach order: Mark is a conflation of Matthew and Luke

- (c) Luke took his order from Mark but his material from Matthew
- c. Others question the need for Q if we can explain everything on basis of known documents
 - (1) Farrer (1985): Matthew drew on Mark and Luke drew on Mark and Matthew
 - (a) Major differences in wording of Q material in Matt and Luke
 - (b) Luke scatters the Q material or Matthew collected it. Why not say Luke knew of Matthew?
- 7. Conclusions
 - a. The priority of Mark is probably the best current theory to account for the data.
 - b. The real solution is probably much more complex than any theory.
 - (1) There are certainly more than 2 sources and there may many more than 4. The disciples could well have taken notes (e.g. Aramaic proto-Matthew theory)
 - (2) Any solution must remain an hypothesis. Beware of people that speak of the 2 document theory as an “assured result of scholarship”.
 - c. Many modern scholars speak of Q as if they know that this existed as a single document.
 - (1) Some study the nature of the “community” that produced Q
 - (2) Remember that it is an hypothesis. It may not have existed. It could be several documents.
 - d. An Aramaic proto-Matthew (perhaps his notes from Jesus’ ministry) may account for the places where Mark appears to use Matthew.
 - e. The influence of oral tradition is very important and generally ignored by source theories.
 - (1) In an oral culture people memorized easily, especially students of a Rabbi. This may account for the sayings of Jesus shared between Matthew and Luke, which makes Q unnecessary.
 - (2) These people knew each other and spoke to each other.
 - f. Beware of exegetical conclusions that depend solely on a particular source theory.

C. A method for doing source criticism on a passage:

1. Mark passage with colored pens to show:
 - Matthew, Mark and Luke unique material
 - Shared between Matt and Mark
 - Shared between Mark and Luke
 - Shared by all three.

2. Propose a theory to explain the similarities and differences:
 - a. Does one of the Gospels appear to be a source for 2 others?
 - b. What materials are unique to each Gospel? Does there appear to be a separate source or eyewitness contribution or does the author only change a few words in one of the other gospels?
 - c. Are there any places where it might appear that agreement goes against the source theory? (e.g. if you think Matt and Luke used Mark, does it ever appear that Mark used Matt or Luke?)

3. Repeat the process for every passage in the Gospels to come up with a source theory.
4. Once you have listed the changes, you can do Redaction Criticism: Why did the person make the changes to his source? Was there a theological motivation or was it just a stylistic preference?

IV. Form Criticism

- A. Form Criticism investigates the period of oral transmission of stories about Jesus and teachings of Jesus
 1. The teachings and stories of Jesus were passed along orally before the Gospels were written down
 2. Started in OT study with Hermann Gunkel study of Genesis and continued with studies of the Psalms.
 3. Around 1920 was brought into Gospel studies: Karl Ludwig Schmidt (1919); Martin Dibelius (1919); Rudolf Bultmann (1921)
- B. Method:
 1. Assumes that the stories and sayings of Jesus originally circulated as independent units, with the possible exception of the Passion narrative.
 2. The laws of transmission can be learned by studying folk traditions in other cultures
 3. The stories and sayings took on certain standard forms as they were retold
 - a. E.g. brief sayings such as “the first shall be last”; parables; stories about miraculous deeds.
 - b. Form critics do not agree of the names, characteristics or even number of these forms
 4. As the stories and sayings were passed along, the early Church modified the material to fit the needs of their community
 - a. Some critics (e.g. Bultmann) are very skeptical and attribute much of the Gospel material to the invention of the early Church.
 - b. Anything which deviates from their rigid definition of the “form” must be invented by the Church, rather than come from Jesus.
 5. The form of a story or saying makes it possible to determine the setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the early Church from which the material came.
 6. Form criticism is often used as a test of the authenticity of sayings of Jesus.
 - a. So called “laws of transmission” are used: As the story is told, people tend to:
 - (1) Lengthen the story
 - (2) Add details
 - (3) Conform them more to their own language
 - (4) Preserve and create what fits their needs
 - b. The criterion of dissimilarity is often used to show what is historical:
 - (1) If it does not fit the interests of the early Church and 1st century Judaism, it is more likely to be historical (e.g. the Son of Man does not know the day of his coming is probably authentic)
 - (2) Radical form critics also use the reverse: If it fits the theology of the early Church or Judaism is it rejected as unhistorical.
- C. Evaluation
 1. Strengths:
 - a. Helpful to interpretation to understand the different forms
 - b. There was an oral transmission period prior to the written Gospels (cf. Luke 1:2 – “handed down” from the eyewitnesses). Form criticism can help us understand this period.
 2. Weaknesses:
 - a. Tendency to overlook that many of these forms may have originated with Jesus.
 - b. It ignores that written materials may have coexisted alongside oral tradition even from an early stage (e.g. notes from some apostles, such as Matthew; early sayings collections). Luke refers to such written materials (Luke 1:1)
 - c. The forms are artificially created. Form critics do not agree on the characteristics of the forms
 - d. The forms should not be used as straight-jackets to determine authenticity.
 - (1) Many “mixed forms” exist, showing that these are fluid categories
 - (2) E.g. form critics such as C. H. Dodd tend to force the parables into their artificial definitions about what a parable should be (a short story with a single point). Anything that does not fit

- was added by the Church. But Jewish examples show more diversity in *maschal* (Parables).
- e. The “laws of transmission” are not as certain as critics claim.
 - (1) The dynamics of passing on sayings are probably more complex.
 - (2) It is not certain that dynamics taken from African culture can be applied to 1st C. Palestinian Judaism.
 - (3) E.P. Sanders has shown that there are examples of oral transmission lengthening material.
 - f. The use of form criticism to determine the *Sitz im Leben* of the early Church is very suspect. It assumes that we know what the original form was, so the argument is circular.
 - g. The method ignores that eye-witnesses would have been around during the period of transmission
 - (1) The process took 20-30 years, not hundreds of years, as in the other oral cultures studied.
 - (2) During this time there were many eyewitnesses around to verify the accuracy of what was said (cf. 1 Cor 15:6)
 - h. It also does not take seriously the great ability of first century Jews to memorize.
 - i. The methods used to determine authenticity must be used with caution
 - (1) The criterion of dissimilarity may point to the authenticity of a saying.
 - (2) But the fact that the Church agrees with Jesus cannot be used as proof that it put the words into Jesus mouth (cf. The Jesus Seminar). It would be expected that the Church would largely agree with the teachings of its founder and record those sayings.