Part Two

CRITICAL METHODS FOR STUDYING THE GOSPELS

Thus far we have surveyed background information relevant to the entire New Testament, though with primary attention to the Gospels. From here on our comments will be directed exclusively toward a better understanding of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Introduction to Critical Methodology

Scholars use numerous "critical" (i.e., analytical) tools to help them understand how these four Gospels came to be in the form we now know them. One major division among the methods distinguishes "lower criticism" from "higher criticism." *Lower criticism* is also known as textual criticism and is the science of sorting and comparing the existing manuscripts of an ancient document with a view to reconstructing the text of the original as accurately as possible. *Higher criticism* involves the various disciplines that seek to explain how that original document was composed—what sources the author used, how he put them together, under what circumstances he wrote, and so on.

Higher criticism can, in turn, be subdivided into two largely discrete disciplines: historical criticism and literary criticism. *Historical criticism* studies the prehistory of a text—all of the influences leading up to and including the final assembling of a finished product by the

author or editor. *Literary criticism* analyzes the features of the text in the final form in which an author "publishes" it. In the case of the Gospels, there is also the interesting phenomenon that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are more similar to each other than different, whereas John's contents differ more. This means that many issues in the formation of Matthew, Mark, and Luke can and should be treated together, whereas the unique issues surrounding John's Gospel merit separate treatment.

The two chapters of part 2 thus treat the various branches of historical and literary criticism. Issues common to the first three Gospels are also treated in these chapters, while topics unique to a particular Gospel are largely reserved for part 3. The rest of this introduction will make some brief remarks about the textual criticism of the Gospels; fuller treatments will have to be sought elsewhere.[1]

Textual Criticism

The existing texts of the Gospels are generally as well preserved as any portion of the ancient copies of Scripture and in better shape than many parts. We, of course, have none of the autographs—the original documents themselves. But the oldest known fragment of any section of the New Testament that can be reliably dated is $\mathfrak{p}^{52}$, the John Rylands papyrus, containing portions of John 18:31–33, 37–38 from the second century.[2] Another two dozen papyri

[1] Most of which involve the textual criticism of the whole New Testament, inasmuch as the principles remain constant throughout. At the most introductory level, see David A. Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism: A Concise Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994). The best elementary-to-intermediate-level treatment is J. Harold Greenlee, *The Text of the New Testament: From Manuscript to Modern Edition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). A standard intermediate work is Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (Oxford; OUP, 2005). For more comprehensive detail, see Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). For Gospels textual criticism specifically, cf. D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 311–47. A good anthology of discussions of newer developments in the discipline is Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2012). A significantly new approach to the grouping of manuscripts and determining their relationships with one another is discussed in Tommy Wasserman and Peter J. Gurry, *A New Approach to Textual Criticism: An Introduction to the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method* (Atlanta: SBL, 2017).

[2] Elijah Hixson, "Dating Myths, Part One: How We Determine the Age of the Manuscripts," in *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, ed. Elijah Hixson and Peter J. Gurry (Downers

containing part or all of one or more of the Gospels date from the second, third, and fourth centuries and are housed in various museums and libraries around the world. The five oldest, most reliable, and most complete New Testaments date from the fourth and fifth centuries, and all contain the Gospels quite well preserved.

Most modern English translations of the New Testament, particularly in "study Bibles," give footnotes (or marginal notes) listing the most significant alternate readings in the ancient manuscripts (called "textual variants") so that readers can know when part of a passage is in significant doubt. The modern editions of the Greek New Testament (UBS and Nestle-Aland) give a much fuller selection of these variants. In addition to numerous minor transmissional errors that can quickly be identified, there are a number of places in the Gospels in which a passage has been modified to make it more closely match parallel accounts in another Gospel (called "harmonistic variants"). Only rarely are entire Greek sentences in dispute. Three well-known examples that probably reflect later scribal additions are the doxology to the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:13b), Jesus's sweat in the garden of Gethsemane resembling great drops of blood (Luke 22:43–44), and the legend of the angel stirring up the water of the pool of Bethesda (John 5:3b–4). On the other hand, Luke 22:19b–20 is missing from some early texts but is probably original. The same may well be true of Jesus forgiving his enemies from the cross (Luke 23:34).

Only two lengthy passages in the entire New Testament are textually disputed; both of these come from the Gospels. The longer ending of Mark (16:9–20) is almost certainly not what Mark wrote. The two oldest and most reliable copies of the Gospel do not contain it (Codices *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*). The style is quite different from the rest of Mark's Gospel, and some of the theology is potentially both heretical and fatal (see v. 18)! These verses themselves contain an inordinately large number of textual variants, and several manuscripts reveal still other alternate endings. Either the original ending of Mark was lost, or the author deliberately ended abruptly with verse 8. Either way, early scribes tried to compensate for the abruptness by giving the Gospel a "proper" ending (see further, p. 192).[3]

Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 109. Hickson acknowledges that it may date to around AD 125, as often suggested, but shows that we just can't be nearly this specific.

[3] For a plausible account of the origin of this longer ending of Mark, see James A. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

John 7:53–8:11 is missing from even more of the oldest and most trustworthy texts. But whereas this story of the "woman caught in adultery" is again not at all likely to have been in the original Gospel of John,[4] a good case can be made that it preserves an account of something Jesus actually did. It fits Jesus's nature, teaching, and ministry, and may well have been handed down by word of mouth until some scribe copying the Gospel decided it was too good to leave out.[5] None of this should alarm the Christian reader; historically, the church's doctrine of Scripture has almost always stressed that it is only the contents of the *original* manuscripts that are authoritative, inspired, or inerrant. For whatever reason, God did not see fit to ensure that those documents were inerrantly preserved. Nevertheless, our ability to reconstruct what the originals looked like is exceedingly high. The contents of 99 percent of the text are certain beyond most reasonable doubt—far better than for any other documents of the same age. Furthermore, no doctrine of the Christian faith hangs on any disputed text, even though disputed texts often have theological significance.[6]

Two extremes thus need to be rejected. On the one hand, those who champion a "King James Bible Only" approach ignore the fact that thousands of manuscripts have come to light since its publication in 1611 in England. Moreover, the King James Version differed at various points from its earlier (unauthorized) English-language predecessors. There simply is no *Textus Receptus* (or "received [i.e., unaltered] text") in Greek or any other language that was copied without at least minor changes down through the centuries prior to the invention of the printing press. None of this makes the Bible inferior to, say, the Qur'an, which since fairly early on has been extremely carefully preserved as one authoritative version.[7] God's providence

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[4] The one point concerning this passage on which there is strong scholarly consensus. See Chris Keith, "Recent and Previous Research on the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7.53–8.11)," *CBR* 6 (2008): 377–404.

[5] See esp. Gary M. Burge, "A Specific Problem in the New Testament Text and Canon: The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 7:53–8:11)," *JETS* 27 (1984): 141–48. Even then there was not unanimous agreement as to where to locate the passage, with some manuscripts including it at the end of John, or in the middle of Luke or at the end of Luke!

[6] See further Daniel B. Wallace, "The Gospel according to Bart: A Review Article of *Misquoting Jesus* by Bart Ehrman," *JETS* 49 (2006): 327–49; and Peter J. Gurry, "Myths about Variants: Why Most Variants Are Insignificant and Why Some Can't Be Ignored," in Hixson and Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, 210.

[7] Noss (*Man's Religions*, 507n*) observes, "There is strong evidence that other collections [of Muhammad's teachings] were made that varied in containing more or less materials and to a certain extent in wording. A second and variant tradition says that the final canonical text resulted from the work of a committee appointed by the Caliph 'Uthmān and headed again by Muhammad's secretary.

may be viewed as even greater when he preserves the exact amount of his original Scriptures necessary to serve as an unerring guide to correct belief and behavior in the midst of all the vicissitudes of human scribal activity.[8]

On the other hand, we must avoid the misleading claims concerning the nature of textual corruption that regularly appear in Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*.[9] There is no reason to doubt the overwhelming probability, at least with the New Testament, and especially with the Gospels, that virtually every original reading of every line of text already appears within the wealth of text forms already available to scholars. Discoveries of new, earlier manuscripts would be highly unlikely to demonstrate dramatic new readings, for the simple reason that the discoveries made during the last half millennium of thousands of previously lost manuscripts spanning every decade from the second through the fifteenth centuries have not produced dramatic new readings. In this light, if a dramatically divergent text were discovered, it would be virtually certain to be the defective reading, since there would be no way of explaining how all traces of that reading disappeared from the thousands of existing texts. In short, there is no slippery slope; there is no legitimate all-or-nothing form of reasoning on this debate. Doubts concerning a tiny number of texts do not translate into major questions on every page of Scripture.[10]

One final observation from recent New Testament textual criticism is important. It is easy for people today to think of the ancient scrolls like modern paperback books. If one uses them a lot, they quickly wear out. Thus, even in just the first few centuries of Christianity, one can imagine papyri being "copies of copies of copies of copies of copies," and so on. In fact, key manuscripts on countless topics were archived in libraries. Even though they sometimes circulated, their average lifespan was about 150 years. The famous fourth-century New Testament, Vaticanus, lasted a full 500 years, after which it was reinked for further use before finally being stored for safekeeping. So, while we have no way of identifying one, any second- or

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Four identical copies were made, and all previous texts were pronounced defective. The 'Uthmānic text met some resistance, but finally prevailed." *Man's Religions*, 507n* (see chap. 2, n. 28).

[8] See further D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); and James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2009).

[9] Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

[10] For a persuasive rebuttal of Ehrman, see Timothy P. Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's* Misquoting Jesus (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007).

third-century manuscript still preserved could *theoretically* have been copied from the original.[11] Given the kinds of differences the earliest existing manuscripts have among themselves, this may not be too likely, but one additional generation is not farfetched, at which point we have only "copies of copies," not some long and almost unending chain of copies.[12]

[11] See esp. Craig A. Evans, "How Long Were Late Antique Books in Use? Possible Implications for New Testament Textual Criticism," *BBR* 25 (2015): 23–37.

[12] Timothy N. Mitchell, "Myths about Autographs: What They Were and How Long They May Have Survived," in Hixson and Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, 47.

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Historical Criticism of the Gospels

The unique fact that we have four different accounts of the life of Jesus has generated interest throughout church history.[1] At the end of the second century, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in France, likened the presence of four Gospels to the existence of four winds or zones of the earth. He believed that theological distinctives accounted for the differences: John wrote of the divine Word of God; Luke, about Jesus's priestly role; Matthew, of his humanity; and Mark, of Christ as prophet (*Adv. Haer.* 3.11.8). Today, scholars agree that various theological distinctives characterize each Gospel but concur with Irenaeus only on his description of John.

A Survey of Views throughout History

During the first seventeen centuries of church history, the most common way of approaching the phenomenon of having four Gospels was that of producing a "harmony" of the four. In other words, a life of Christ was reconstructed with every text from each Gospel fitted into a possible place in one larger, composite whole. The first known Christian harmony of the Gospels came from the late second-century Syrian, Tatian, and was called the *Diatessaron* (from the Gk. "through four"). Church greats for more than a millennium followed suit, though the details varied. Augustine and Calvin both wrote commentaries on a harmony of the Gospels as well.

Church Fathers generally assumed that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written in that order, with Mark and Luke both knowing and using Matthew's Gospel, thus accounting for

[1] Cf. the relevant material scattered throughout Werner G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972; and Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986* (Oxford: OUP, 1988). At a more popular level, cf. Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus: A Symbolic Reading* (London: SPCK, 1994).

their similarities. It was often assumed that John, too, knew the other three but consciously chose to supplement them and not repeat much of the information already contained in the works of his predecessors.

The principles of the Enlightenment of the 1700s led to quite different approaches to Scripture. The Bible was studied by people, at first primarily in Germany, who were not necessarily orthodox believers or who bracketed their faith in order to leave the door open for historical conclusions quite at odds with traditional dogma. They studied the Bible like any other ancient document, not assuming in advance that everything in it was necessarily true, much less inspired.[2] With respect to the Gospels, the accounts of miracles came under close scrutiny. Late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century scholars such as Samuel Reimarus and H. E. G. Paulus developed *rationalist* or naturalistic interpretations of the miracle narratives: the feeding of the five thousand involved rich people in the crowds sharing their lunches after seeing the model of generosity by Jesus and the young man; Jesus only appeared to walk on the water—he was actually wading close to shore—and so on.[3]

In the 1830s, D. F. Strauss ushered in a new era in dealing with the Gospels. He rejected both the traditional attempts to harmonize them and the rationalist school of thought in favor of an understanding of Jesus's more spectacular deeds and claims as *myths*—pious but fictitious legends that couched theological beliefs about Jesus in narrative form.[4] In the middle of the nineteenth century, F. C. Baur built on the dialectical philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (who also inspired Marx) and described the origins of Christianity in terms of "thesis-antithesis-synthesis."[5] Following the description of Paul's confrontation with Peter at Antioch (Gal 2:11–15), Baur divided all of the New Testament writings into three categories: conservative Jewish Christianity (like Peter), liberal law-free Gentile Christianity (like Paul), and later syntheses attempting to reconcile the two. As far as the Gospels were concerned, Matthew was the most Jewish (and thus most authentic); Luke, the most Gentile or Pauline; and Mark, a second-century attempt to reconcile the two.[6]

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[2] See esp. David L. Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

[3] See esp. H. Samuel Reimarus, *Fragments*, ed. C. H. Talbert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970 [Germ. orig. 1782]).

[4] David F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972 [Germ. orig. 1835]).

[5] See esp. Horton Harris, *The Tübingen School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

[6] For a focused look at these and other key participants from the 1600s to the present, see Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Throughout the nineteenth century, numerous scholars also composed "lives of Jesus." Believing that the Gospels were a blend of fact and fiction, they sought to strip away the later theological interpretations of the early church from the "historical Jesus." Tellingly, however, many of the "Jesuses" they produced strikingly resembled whatever philosophy or ideology the given author himself propounded—whether revolutionary or pacifist, romantic or mystic. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer, the theologian and musician who later became a famous missionary doctor to Africa, wrote a devastating exposé of how the authors of all these "lives" simply re-created Jesus in their own likenesses. Schweitzer's own understanding of Jesus, however, proved equally truncated: an apocalyptic prophet who believed the kingdom would come in all its fullness during his lifetime, or at least soon after his death, but who was sadly mistaken.[7]

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scholars also became increasingly fascinated with the "Synoptic problem," as J. J. Griesbach first named it in the late 1700s. The Synoptic Gospels are Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so named because their similarities enable them to be set side by side in parallel columns in a *synopsis* (from the Gk. for "together look").[8] The Synoptic problem, then, is the question of their literary interrelationship. Griesbach broke from the tradition that had persisted since Augustine of seeing Mark and Luke each dependent on Matthew and argued that Mark was the last of the three Synoptic Gospels to be written, as an abridgment of Matthew and Luke. In the 1800s, particularly under the influence of C. H. Weisse and H. J. Holtzmann, a third explanation became dominant: Mark wrote first; then Matthew and Luke both used and expanded Mark's Gospel. It was also widely believed that Matthew and Luke had access to a second source, perhaps largely a compilation of sayings of Jesus (designated Q, from the German *Quelle*, which means "source"), in order to account for most of the remaining material they shared which was not found in Mark.

The development of twentieth-century Gospels scholarship was characterized by successive interest in different critical tools, each building on its predecessor. For the first quarter of the century, *source criticism* predominated as further defense and elaboration of

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[7] Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, ed. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001 [Germ. orig. 1906]). Nuancing these generalizations is Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus the Purifier: The Fourth Gospel and the Fourth Quest of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023).

[8] Students will find the study of the Gospels (and an understanding of this chapter) greatly enhanced as they consult such a synopsis periodically. A standard English edition, using the RSV, is Kurt Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1982). A Greek-English edition is also available.

"Markan priority" flourished. The 1970s and 1980s saw a revival of interest in the Griesbach hypothesis, largely due to the tireless crusades of and international conferences organized by William R. Farmer.[9] In the last thirty-plus years, while still supporting Markan priority, Michael Goulder and Mark Goodacre have sparked even more support for the view that Luke relied directly on Matthew as well as Mark.[10] This is also known as the Farrer hypothesis, after the Englishman Austin Farrer, who ably promoted it in the 1950s.[11] Still, neither of these options has replaced Markan priority plus Q as the majority view worldwide among New Testament scholars.

For the second quarter of the twentieth century, interest shifted to *form criticism*—an analysis of the period before the Gospels were written when stories and excerpts of Jesus's life and teachings circulated almost entirely by word of mouth. As its title suggests, form criticism also studied the distinctive interpretive principles that each kind of rhetorical or literary unit in the Gospels requires, along with the contexts within the early church in which the various forms of the Jesus tradition were likely to have been preserved.

Not long after 1950, *redaction criticism* came to the fore. This discipline concentrated on the Gospel writers as redactors or editors. Redaction criticism sought to determine why they chose what they did to include or omit, how they arranged their material, and what distinctive theological emphases each wanted to stress. Since about 1975, interest has increasingly shifted to *literary criticism*—treating the Gospels as works of literature and analyzing their plots, themes, characterization, figures of speech, and so on.

During the last sixty-plus years, the "quest of the historical Jesus" has reemerged too. After reaching an all-time low during the era of the prolific Rudolf Bultmann, who once said that all we could know about Jesus was "*that* he lived and died,"[12] several of his students in the 1950s embarked on a "new quest" that admitted a fairly significant amount of Jesus's *teachings*

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[9] Farmer's foundational work was *The Synoptic Problem* (New York: Macmillan, 1964; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1981). For his mature thought, cf. *The Gospel of Jesus: The Pastoral Relevance of the Synoptic Problem* (Louisville: WJKP, 1994). For his influence in just twenty years, see Christopher Tuckett, *The Revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis: An Analysis and Appraisal* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983).

[10] See esp. Michael D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm*, 2 vols. (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1989); and Mark S. Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels: An Examination of a New Paradigm* (Sheffield, UK: SAP, 1996). Cf. also John C. Poirier and Jeffrey Peterson, *Marcan Priority without Q: Explorations in the Farrer Hypothesis* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

[11] Austin Farrer, "On Dispensing with Q," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. Dennis E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 55–88.

[12] Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 235. When fleshing out this statement, however, Bultmann did affirm a small core of information about Jesus's ministry that could be accepted

as historical, at least in the Synoptic Gospels.[13] Since just before 1980, that quest has taken an even more conservative turn, buttressed primarily by a resurgence of interest in Jesus as a Jew. This so-called "third quest" for Jesus of Nazareth finds some historically accurate material in almost all major categories of Synoptic teachings and deeds of Jesus, although John is still seen as noticeably more theological than historical (but see p. 312).

What do we make of this potpourri of perspectives that has emerged over the centuries, particularly in recent years? To begin with, we must admit that much of modern scholarship has adopted presuppositions that are not readily compatible with historic, Christian faith. Indeed, many proponents of "the historical-critical method" have defined it to include three quite skeptical principles of the nineteenth-century philosopher Ernst Troeltsch: (1) "methodical doubt," whereby one is suspicious of any historical narrative unless strong corroborating evidence is found to support its claims; (2) the use of "analogy," so that events without precedent in history are inherently impossible; and (3) the principle of "correlation," which posits a closed continuum of natural causes and effects in the universe.[14] On the other hand, every one of the disciplines surveyed has relied on painstaking analysis of the actual data of the Gospels and has been used to varying degrees with profit by conservative scholars in ways that are compatible with orthodox faith.

The remainder of this chapter examines in more detail the three dominant methodologies of the period from about 1900 to 1975, all of which still are firmly entrenched in Gospel scholarship—source, form, and redaction criticism. *The order of our survey this time will correspond to the chronology of the events each method studies in the life of the early church*: first, form criticism with its focus on the period of oral tradition; next, source criticism with its analysis of the first written accounts about Jesus; finally, redaction criticism with its concentration on the role of the evangelists in producing the Gospels as we know them.

Luke, with the information he provides in his prologue (Luke 1:1–4), seems to have anticipated this threefold division of study of the formation of the Gospels.[15] He speaks of "the

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as historical. See his magnum opus, titled *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [Germ. orig. 1921]).

[13] Beginning with Ernst Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1964 [Germ. orig. 1954], 15–47). In the US, the key impetus came from James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1959).

[14] See further Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

[15] Robert H. Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 44–45.

things that have been fulfilled among us" as being "handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (vv. 1b–2)—*the period of oral tradition.* He also states that "many [including at least Mark and Matthew?] have undertaken to draw up an account" of these things (v. 1a)—language in the Greek that most naturally refers to written narratives—*the oldest Gospels or Gospel sources.* But, having functioned as a careful historian (v. 3a), Luke likewise wanted to write his own distinctive account (v. 3b) in order to commend the truth of the Gospel (v. 4). This corresponds to the discipline of redaction criticism—*the stage of final redaction for theological purposes.*

If some readers wonder if all this "criticism" really is compatible with belief in the Gospels as inspired books, the answer is clearly yes. Of course, we must carefully examine any given practitioner's use of each method, for at times much "chaff" is mixed in with the "wheat." *Nonetheless, the basic principles are not only sound but also are demanded if one believes in the accuracy of Luke's description of how he wrote.* Given the similarities among Luke, Mark, and Matthew, and, to a lesser degree, John, it stands to reason that the other evangelists proceeded somewhat similarly. Gospel criticism is not inherently an alternative to belief in the inspiration of the texts, although it has been used that way by some radical critics. Rather, it is a study of the ordinary human means of writing that God's Spirit superintended so as to ensure that the final product was exactly what God wanted to communicate to his people (cf. 2 Pet 1:21).

Form Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels: The Period of Oral Tradition[16]

The Method

The rise of Gospel form criticism is associated primarily with three early twentieth-century German scholars: K. L. Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and, above all, Rudolf Bultmann.[17] Analogous to work already being done in Old Testament studies, these scholars proposed three major stages to the analysis of the period of oral tradition behind the Gospels. First,

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[16] Cf. further Craig L. Blomberg, "Form Criticism," in *DJG*, 243–50; and Darrell L. Bock, "Form Criticism," in *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, ed. David A. Black and David R. Beck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 106–27.

[17] K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969 [orig. 1919]); Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Scribner, 1965; London: James Clarke, 2000 [Germ. orig. 1919]); Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition.*

they believed that the Gospels could be subdivided into discrete "pericopae" (self-contained passages) and analyzed according to the *form* (almost a "mini-genre") of each. Forms included parables, miracle stories, pronouncement stories (short controversial episodes climaxed by a key saying of Jesus), proverbs, wisdom sayings, "I-sayings," lengthier discourses, and so on.[18] Some of the labels also involved historical judgments: myths, legends, or utterances of early Christian prophets in the name of Jesus.

Second, form critics assigned each form to a *Sitz im Leben* ("situation in life") in the history of the early church. Pronouncement stories, it was believed, were widely used in popular preaching; miracle narratives, in apologetic interaction. Legends were supposedly created to glorify Jesus as a great hero. Parables were transmitted by popular storytellers. Pronouncement or conflict stories were thought to speak to ongoing controversies within the early communities of Jesus-followers.

Third, form criticism developed "laws" of the *transmission of tradition*. As bits and pieces of information about Jesus were passed along orally, it was claimed, stories tended to get longer, be embellished with additional unhistorical detail, be given explanatory clarifications and interpretations, have names supplied for previously unnamed characters, be given new contexts and new applications, and be grouped together with other individual teachings. It was the responsibility of the form critic, therefore, to try to strip away all these "secondary accretions" and find the historical kernel, if any, in each passage that represented what Jesus actually did or said.[19]

Several assumptions fueled the form-critical agenda. First, critics assumed that no one wrote down anything Jesus said while he was alive, and that the early Christians relied at first entirely on oral tradition. Second, oral tradition was always viewed as composed of discrete units of material circulating independently of each other. Third, the material that was preserved must have proved useful for some specific purpose in the life of the early church. Fourth, little biographical, geographical, or chronological information about the events and teachings of Jesus's ministry was preserved; this all had to be "created" later. Fifth, analogies from the oral folklore of other countries—from as far away as Europe or Africa—were used

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[18] The most complete English-language analysis appears in James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (Louisville: WJKP, 1992). The most comprehensive treatment of all is Klaus Berger, *Formen und Gattungen im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Francke, 2005).

[19] The "laws" for the developing parable tradition formulated by Joachim Jeremias comprise a particularly influential and extensive example. See Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 23–114.

to reconstruct how the early Christian oral tradition would have developed. Sixth, it is unlikely that more than a handful of authentic Jesus texts survived this process unscathed. After all, who today, playing the child's game of telephone, expects a whispered message transmitted around a room of thirty or more people to come out the same at the end? One can hardly imagine numerous Jesus-traditions passed around for a generation throughout the ancient Middle East to fare any better. Or so the critics claimed.[20] As it turns out, there could scarcely be an analogy *less* applicable to the nature of ancient oral tradition than that one![21]

Critique

Although form criticism developed primarily as a ***historical*** tool, one of its major strengths came as a by-product—its potential for *interpretation*. In this sense, form criticism does for individual passages what literary criticism does for entire books (see chap. 5). It recognizes that the Gospels are not monolithic wholes but are composed of subunits of many different literary forms. Thus, often these identifications of subunits and the kinds of literary forms they contain can be useful aids in interpretation.

Parables should not be interpreted in the same way as straightforward history; proverbs are not identical to absolute truths; and pronouncement stories focus all attention on their climactic (and controversial) pronouncements. In several places, the Synoptic writers seem to have organized their Gospels by grouping together stories of like form. Therefore, an understanding of the different forms can help us recover the evangelists' outlines and discover, for example, when not to assume that certain events are recorded in chronological order. In other words, the interpretive value of form criticism is enormous.[22]

As a historical tool, however, many tenets and assumptions of form criticism must be seriously questioned. There is nothing inherently improbable about each form being particularly useful for a given life situation in the early church, but the actual data available to recover these are virtually nonexistent. The so-called tendencies of the tradition—to embellish and become increasingly "distinct"—find some support in how later apocryphal traditions dealt with the

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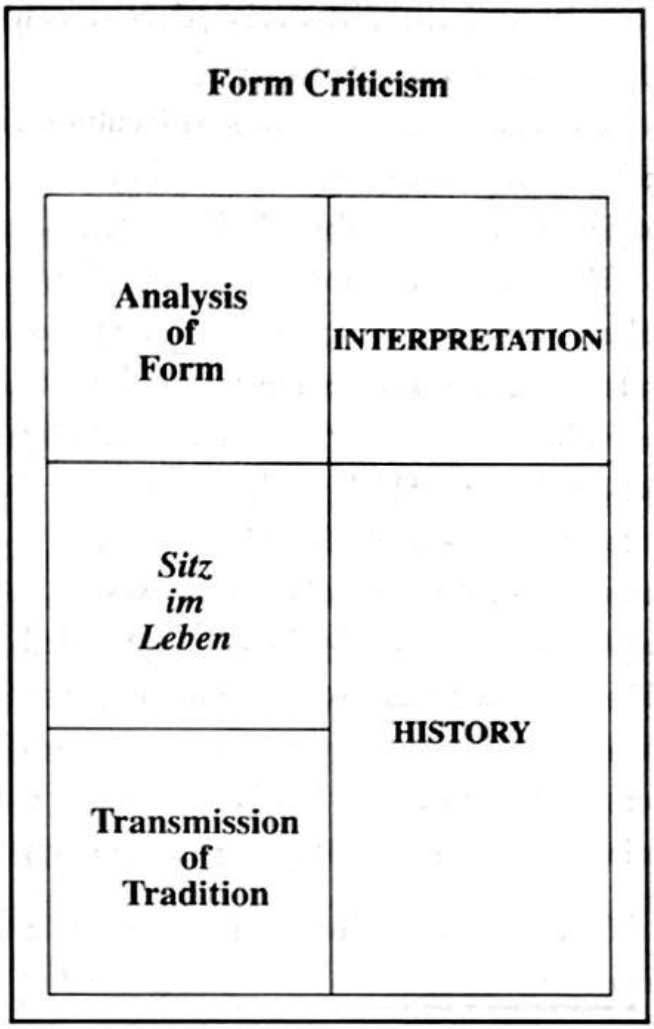
[20] See, e.g., Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 51–52.

[21] See esp. Alan Kirk, "Ehrman, Bauckham, and Bird on Memory and the Jesus Tradition," *JSHJ* 15 (2017): 88–114, esp. 94–98.

[22] Cf. further William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 523–32.



canonical Gospels. But *within* the canon, as one proceeds from Mark to Matthew and Luke, more often than not there is a tendency to abbreviate and streamline.[23] Many of the other assumptions about the lack of historical interest or care with which the tradition preserved details about Jesus's life and teaching are also questionable. Analogies from other continents and the development of oral folklore over a period of centuries are not as relevant as studies of first-century Jewish oral culture and what likely developed over only a few decades. In fact, a good case can be made that the oral tradition of Jesus's words and deeds was extremely

[23] See esp. Leslie R. Keylock, "Bultmann's Law of Increasing Distinctness," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 193–210. Richard Bauckham observes that there was no significant trend to increase the overall number of names in a given Gospel tradition until at least the fourth century. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 43–44.

conservative and painstaking in preserving historical truth accurately. We may list nine pieces of evidence:

1. *Memorization* was highly cultivated in ancient Jewish culture. As we have seen (p. 94), it was the predominant method of elementary education for boys. The disciples of the prophets had memorized and passed on their founders' words. Venerated rabbis had at times committed the entire Bible (our "Old Testament") to memory. It would have been quite normal and expected for Jesus's disciples, revering their Teacher, to commit to memory significant portions of his teaching and even brief narratives of his great works, and to have remembered those accounts accurately for a considerable span of time. As much as 80 percent of Jesus's teaching seems to have been cast in poetic form, which would have made its memorization that much easier.[24] In addition, the technical language of receiving and passing on traditions in 1 Cor 11:2, 23, and 15:3 suggests that Paul recognized that he was delivering to the Corinthians fixed pieces of information he had been given by those who preceded him in Christ. Still, none of this would have precluded the disciples from paraphrasing, interpreting, and rearranging the material they had learned; that, too, was the convention of the day.[25] To varying degrees, prodigious feats of memorization, but with the "gist" of an episode rather than verbatim accuracy as the goal, characterized all of classical antiquity.[26] Moreover, with Birger Gerhardsson,

> if one compares the different versions of one and the same tradition in the Synoptic Gospels, one notes that the variations are seldom so general as to give us reason to speak of a fluid tradition which gradually became fixed. The alterations are not of the nature they would have been had originally elastic material been formulated in different ways. The tradition elements seem to have possessed a remarkably fixed wording. Variations generally take the form of additions, omissions, transpositions, or alterations of single details in a wording which otherwise is left unchanged.[27]

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[24] Rainer Riesner, "The Orality and Memory Hypothesis," in *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 100.

[25] Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript with Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*, 2 vols. bound in 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); and Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Boston: Brill, 2002).

[26] Jocelyn P. Small, "Artificial Memory and the Writing Habits of the Literate," *Helios* 22 (1995): 159–66. Cf. Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 73–99.

[27] Birger Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 54.

Too many scholars skeptical of these approaches have appealed to modern examples of people's inability to remember, without factoring in the striking differences in the use of memory in oral cultures without access to all the myriad of devices for retrieving information that we have. And even in our world, "memory can be especially reliable when handling atypical events that one personally participated in, found mentally engaging, experienced as emotionally intense, and then later rehearsed."[28] A sizable majority of the details of the New Testament Gospels are based on memories that would qualify under each one of these headings. Memories are also often the strongest with formative events during the years of late teens and early twenties, precisely the ages Jesus's disciples most likely were.[29]

2. The continuing presence of *eyewitnesses* to the words and works of Christ, including hostile ones, throughout the entire period of the oral tradition, would have acted as a check to stories running wild or being created out of thin air. Richard Bauckham has given plausible reasons why many of the more minor, named characters in the Gospels may themselves be the eyewitness sources for the episodes in which they were involved and has suggested that at least some of the unnamed characters functioned similarly but were being protected from possible persecution by remaining unnamed.[30]

3. Also, within the Christian community there would have been limits placed on the way the Gospel traditions were narrated. Traditional Middle Eastern villagers even today exercise considerable flexibility in orally transmitting cherished traditions, but the entire community knows the boundaries that cannot be transgressed and will correct a storyteller if he or she crosses over them.[31] The accuracy of all the claims of some of these contemporary studies has been challenged, but enough has remained unscathed to preserve the point.[32]

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[28] Dale C. Allison Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 9n46.

[29] Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 420.

[30] Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, esp. 39–66, 290–318.

[31] Kenneth E. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *AJT* 5 (1991): 34–54 (repr., *Themelios* 20 [1995]: 4–11); James D. G. Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-Envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition," *NTS* 49 (2003): 139–75.

[32] For the challenge, see Theodore Weedon, "Kenneth Bailey's Theory of Oral Tradition: A Theory Contested by Its Evidence," *JSHJ* 7 (2009): 3–43; for the responses, see James D. G. Dunn, "Kenneth Bailey's Theory of Oral Tradition: Critiquing Theodore Weeden's Critique," *JSHJ* 7 (2009): 44–62; and Craig S. Keener, "Weighing T. J. Weeden's Critique of Kenneth Bailey's Approach," *JGRChJ* 13 (2017): 41–78.

4. Recent studies of "social memory" also demonstrate how checks and balances of various kinds help to streamline and somewhat standardize the ways communities, ancient and modern, corporately tell their own stories, with less variation than when individuals in a given group independently report on events.[33] Wholesale fabrication is rare in such settings.[34] Of course, there are examples of significant distortion, both intentional and unintentional, as communities repeat and transmit their valued traditions, and it is important not to confuse the highlighting of checks and balances against false or misleading memories with claims of having demonstrated the reliability of specific actions or teachings of Jesus. But what information we can reconstruct about the nature of the earliest Christian oral tradition produces more optimism than pessimism about how it functioned.[35] In particular, the center of apostolic leadership in Jerusalem with its various delegations and councils probably functioned as one of these key checks (cf. Acts 8, 10–11, 15).[36] As Barry Schwartz generalizes in studies of ancient social memory, "Reality counts more than bias in the remembering of most events most of the time."[37]

5. Although sacred traditions were handed down primarily by word of mouth, rabbis and their followers often took *private notes* of important material, which they consulted from time to time to refresh their memories. It would be unusual if Jesus's followers had not done the same.[38] One may also point to the prevalence of wax notebook tablets (cf. Luke 1:63) and to the concern among the Essenes at Qumran to record in writing their scriptural interpretations (unlike the Pharisees who kept written and oral laws more distinct). As a similar breakaway

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[33] See esp. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 319–57. Cf. several of the articles in Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, eds., *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL, 2005).

[34] Robert K. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels* (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 109.

[35] James D. G. Dunn, "Social Memory and the Oral Jesus Tradition," in *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity: The Fifth Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium (Durham, September 2004)*, ed. Stephen C. Barton, Loren T. Stuckenbruck, and Benjamin G. Wold (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 193.

[36] See esp. E. Earle Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 28–47.

[37] Barry Schwartz, "Where There's Smoke, There's Fire: Memory and History," in *Memory and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 21.

[38] E. Earle Ellis, "New Directions in Form Criticism," in *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie*, ed. Georg Strecker (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1975), 299–315; Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, 175–76, 202–4, 227–29 (see chap. 2, n. 69). Most of the evidence, as for the Jewish schools, comes from the early to middle rabbinic periods, but we know that forms (as opposed to content) of education were very stable over centuries in antiquity, and no ancient evidence suggests otherwise. Many of the Hebrew Scriptures were remarkably well preserved over the centuries that include from Jesus's time onward.

movement from more orthodox Judaism, Christianity probably had more in common with the Essenes than the Pharisees at this point.[39]

6. There was a *Sitz im Leben* already during the ministry of Jesus for his followers to have formulated *succinct summaries of his words and works*—the missions of the Twelve and the seventy—so that the first attempts to formulate the material that would later form part of the Gospels probably took place within months or weeks of the very events described. Plus, they would have already heard Jesus recite some things dozens or more times. And early collections of his words would doubtless have been deemed most sacred.[40]

7. Despite all the flexibility in narration and apparent "contradictions" among the Gospels, these documents do not naturally read as though they included information created for the first time after Jesus's death and resurrection. If the early church felt free to "play fast and loose" with the Gospel tradition, why do there remain so many problem passages, the so-called *hard sayings* of Jesus? Why do we read that Jesus claimed not to know the time of his return (Mark 13:32 pars.)? Or what of the three passages that have misled some into thinking that he did claim to know—and predicted his return within the lifetime of his followers (Matt 10:23; Mark 9:1 pars.; Mark 13:30 pars.)? Conversely, if later Christian prophets spoke in the name of the risen Lord and had their teachings attributed to the earthly Jesus, why do we find *no sayings* of Christ in the Gospels to clear up major early church controversies—the dispute between Jews and Gentiles over whether or not to keep the law, the role of circumcision in the Christian life, or a proper approach to speaking in tongues?[41] First Corinthians 7:10 and 12 testify to Paul's care not to create a word from the historical Jesus to solve sticky matters about divorce when he didn't have one.

8. Why, on the other hand, do we find *major emphases in the Gospels that are not stressed by the later church*? Perhaps the most striking of these is Jesus's characteristic reference to himself as "Son of Man." Our final chapter discusses the meaning of this title, but a point to

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[39] Alan Millard, "Writing and the Gospels," *Qumran Chronicle* 5 (1995): 55–62.

[40] See esp. James A. Baird, *Holy Word: The Paradigm of New Testament Formation* (New York: SAP, 2002).

[41] Against the view, more generally, that early Christian prophets created sayings of Jesus de novo, see David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Richmond: John Knox, 1979); and David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003). For a subsequent defense of that view, see M. Eugene Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus: Christian Prophecy and the Gospel Tradition* (Louisville: WJKP, 1991); in turn countered by Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 293–328.

be made here is that, except for one reference apiece in Acts and Revelation, this title never recurs throughout the rest of the New Testament even though it was Jesus's most common self-designation, at least in the four Gospels. If distinctions between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus were blurred, this omission would be inexplicable.[42]

9. It has sometimes been said that even if Jesus did not explicitly predict his return within one generation, his first followers were clearly looking for it (cf., e.g., 1 and 2 Thess). What is more, people who think the world will soon end are not interested in writing literature, much less history. But the *massive production of literature at Qumran*, including the retelling of Old Testament history, despite the Essenes' belief that they were living very near to the end, belies this skepticism. Jews in general, moreover, had been wrestling from at least the eighth century BC onward with the tension between prophetic declarations that the Day of the Lord was at hand and the ongoing course of human history. Their most common solution was to cite Ps 90:4 that a day with the Lord is like one thousand years. So, it is unlikely that a religion like Christianity, which was birthed out of Judaism, would have been unprepared to envision the possibility that human history might continue for a substantial period of time before Christ returned.[43]

Nevertheless, despite all these criticisms, the dominant presupposition of form criticism—that of an initial period of oral tradition for the Gospel material—is well founded.[44] Mark and Luke in particular, as non-eyewitnesses of the events they narrated, would have depended on such tradition extensively. When we come to date the Gospels and their written sources, we will see that this period may have lasted only twenty to forty years rather than the forty to sixty years some posit (see chaps. 6–9), but any illumination of this first phase of Christian origins is to be welcomed. Michael Bird summarizes it well: "I am suggesting that the term 'Jesus in social memory' is a useful signifier" for this period. "It highlights that the tradition is ultimately a memory, and that memory is transmitted and transformed by a mnemonic process of both individuals and groups. Such a model also enables us to unify the elements of bias and biography, to uncover a memory that is reliable but also refracted." Bird continues, "Aided by eyewitnesses, teachers, a discernible process of handing-on and receiving traditions,

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[42] For a more detailed list of similar contrasts, see Eugene E. Lemcio, *The Past of Jesus in the Gospels* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991).

[43] See esp. Richard Bauckham, "The Delay of the Parousia," *TynB* 31 (1980): 3–36.

[44] For a detailed overview, see Kelly R. Iverson, "Orality and the Gospels: A Survey of Recent Research," *CBR* 8 (2009): 71–106. For a broader but even more recent survey, see Nicholas A. Elder, "New Testament Media Criticism," *CBR* 15 (2017): 315–37.

and a rich mix of oral mnemonics and textual aide-mémoire, the early church remembered Jesus, recounting him as a Judean sage as much as a divine savior."[45] But the accounts of Jesus did not long remain in purely oral form. So, we must pass to the next phase—that of the first extensive written accounts of Jesus's life.

Source Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels

The Synoptic Problem[46]

From time to time in the history of the church, various people have suggested that there is no literary relationship among the Synoptic Gospels. They argue that the similarities can be explained because the Gospels describe the same events and because God inspired them.[47] The vast majority of careful students of the Gospels reject these conclusions, however. In addition to Luke's testimony (see p. 248), four other features are not adequately accounted for by this approach. First, the parallelism between two Gospels is often *verbatim* for entire clauses or sentences and, even more commonly, identical except for an occasional substitution of a different word from the same root, a synonym, or a slight change in word order. Although statistics vary from textbook to textbook based on how exact the wording of two verses in two different Gospels must be for them to be labeled "parallel," a rough estimate of the amount of parallelism is as follows: of the 661 verses in Mark, 500 recur in Matthew in parallel form and 350 recur in Luke. In addition, another 235 verses common to Matthew and Luke are

[45] Bird, *Gospel of the Lord*, 112–13 (see chap. 3, n. 87). For the need to combine elements of memorization, flexible tradition within fixed limits, and social or corporate memory, rather than pitting each against the others, see Michael F. Bird, "The Formation of the Gospels in the Setting of Early Christianity: The Jesus Tradition as Corporate Memory," *WTJ* 67 (2005): 113–34.

[46] For the points in this subsection, see esp. Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 29–152; and Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990), 136–208. For a recent survey of the landscape, see Stanley E. Porter, "The Synoptic Problem: The State of the Question," *JGRChJ* 12 (2016): 73–98.

[47] So esp. Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). For a much more sophisticated version of the literary dependence hypothesis, based on hypotheses of memorization and oral tradition and intermediate sources that each Gospel uniquely drew on, see Rainer Riesner, "The Orality and Memory Hypothesis," 89–111. Cf. also, more tentatively, T. M. Derico, *Oral Tradition and Synoptic Verbal Agreement: Evaluating the Empirical Evidence for Literary Dependence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016).

not found in Mark.[48] This parallelism occurs not only with Jesus's teachings, where one might argue that the early church simply memorized them, but also with the narrative descriptions of what Christ did. Given the diversity of ways that two different authors can describe the same episode, such verbal parallelism virtually requires that one copied from the other or that both copied from a common source. A professor encountering a similar phenomenon on two students' term papers, even occasionally, would certainly agree!

Second, even with Jesus's sayings, it is noteworthy that this verbal parallelism occurs *in Greek*, that is, in translation of the Aramaic that Jesus originally spoke. Anyone who has studied a foreign language knows that there are often numerous ways to translate a given sentence or paragraph from one language to another. Repeated examples of identical translations suggest literary dependence of some kind, unless one posits the less likely hypothesis that the first Jewish Christians circulated accounts of Jesus's teaching in fixed form in Greek translation.

Third, the agreement among the Synoptics extends to *parenthetical comments* or explanatory asides added by a particular author. For example, both Mark 13:14 and Matt 24:15 insert the remark, "let the reader understand," in the middle of their accounts of Jesus predicting the setting up of the "abomination that causes desolation" in the temple. Both Mark 2:10 and Matt 9:6 break off Jesus's words to the onlookers on the occasion of his healing the paralyzed man at exactly the same place: "But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." Both then go on to write, "He said to the paralyzed man," and continue with Jesus's words. These would be extraordinary coincidences if Matthew and Mark had no knowledge of each other or some common written document.

Fourth, the parallelism also involves the *order of episodes* that are not linked together chronologically. For example, Mark 2:1–3:6 combines a series of five controversy stories between Jesus and the Jewish leaders without ever indicating the sequence in which they took place. Yet Matthew and Luke both preserve this exact sequence of episodes, although Matthew does insert intervening material (see Matt 9:1–17; 12:1–14; Luke 5:17–6:11). Or, on a smaller scale, Mark "sandwiches" the story of Peter's denial around his account of Jesus before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53–54, 55–65, 66–72). Matthew employs the identical stylistic device (Matt 26:57–58, 59–68, 69–75), an unlikely coincidence, particularly given the fact that Luke more conventionally rearranges the material into two discrete stories (Luke 22:54–62, 63–71).

[48] These statistics are taken from H. Wayne House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), chart 9.

If the overwhelming probability, then, is that the Synoptics are related at a literary level, what is the nature of that relationship? We will consider the most common and most probable answer to that question in three stages, in decreasing order of certainty: Markan priority, the Q hypothesis, and additional sources distinct to Matthew and Luke.

Markan Priority

Strengths. Numerous arguments of varying weights have cumulatively suggested to a majority of modern scholars that Mark was the first Gospel to be written and that Matthew and Luke both drew heavily on his work:[49]

1. At many points, Mark's details are the most vivid, while Matthew and Luke omit what seem to be the touches of an eyewitness report: for example, "after sunset" in Mark 1:32 (cf. Matt 8:16), the "green" grass in Mark 6:39 (cf. Matt 14:19; Luke 9:14), or the "three hundred denarii" of Mark 14:5 (NRSV) (cf. Matt 26:9).[50]

2. Mark's grammar and style is often the roughest, whereas Matthew and Luke make it smoother. Mark has a fondness for asyndeton (leaving out conjunctions), parataxis (using just "and" when he does connect clauses), the historical present tense, redundancies, double negatives, and convoluted order of clauses.

3. Mark narrates potentially embarrassing or misleading details that the other evangelists omit or reword: for example, the apparent "error" (see p. 387, n. 29) in referring to Abiathar as high priest in 2:26 (cf. Matt 12:4; Luke 6:4); the statement that Jesus "could" work few miracles in Nazareth in 6:5 (cf. Matt 13:58; Luke 4:24); and Jesus's reply to the rich young ruler in 10:18: "Why do you call me good? . . . No one is good—except God alone" (cf. Matt 19:17).

4. Mark's is the shortest of the Gospels, yet within the passages he narrates, his is typically the fullest form. Of 92 passages that Mark and Luke have in common, Mark is longer 71 times. Of 104 he shares with Matthew, he is longer in 63.[51] It makes sense for Matthew and

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[49] Cf. esp. Grant R. Osborne and Matthew C. Williams, "The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins: The Two/Four Source View," in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 19–96. More briefly, cf. Scot McKnight, "Source Criticism," in Black and Dockery, *Interpreting the New Testament*, 74–105; and Craig A. Evans, "Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem: Why an Old Approach Is Still Best," in *Reading the Gospels Today*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1–26.

[50] These examples are taken from Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 151.

[51] Craig L. Blomberg, "The Tradition History of the Parables Peculiar to Luke's Central Section" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1982), 25–27.

Luke to have abbreviated Mark's characteristically detailed accounts to make room for other information about Jesus they wanted to add; both Gospels contain about the maximum length of material that could conveniently fit on an ancient scroll. If Mark was abridging Matthew and Luke, as Griesbach claimed, it would make little sense for him to lengthen those accounts that he did choose to include.

5. There is very little in Mark not reproduced in Matthew and Luke (less than 10 percent of his Gospel overall). Unless Mark was the first to write, why would he bother, with so little new or distinctive to say? One answer has been to argue that he was trying to create a digest of the two, just as epitomizers often condensed long multivolume histories in the ancient world into one manageably sized volume. But careful analysis of Mark's style, format, and contents has shown that his work remains more unlike any known summary or digest from the ancient world than like one.[52]

6. Matthew and Luke only rarely deviate from Mark in sequence of passages or nature of wording in the same way at the same time, whereas Matthew and Mark frequently agree against Luke (i.e., have the same wording when Luke develops the narrative differently), and Luke and Mark frequently agree against Matthew. What this demonstrates is that Mark must be the "middle term" of the three, that is, he was either the first on which the other two drew, the last (abridging the first two, as with Griesbach), or the Gospel that drew on either Matthew or Luke and was in turn drawn on by the other one (as with Augustine's sequence of Matthew-Mark-Luke). "With the Augustinian hypothesis, we would have to think that Luke almost always chose to use Mark's wording rather than Matthew's; with the two-gospel hypothesis [Griesbach], we would have to assume that Mark almost never introduced any wording of his own. While possible, both procedures are less likely than the alternative."[53]

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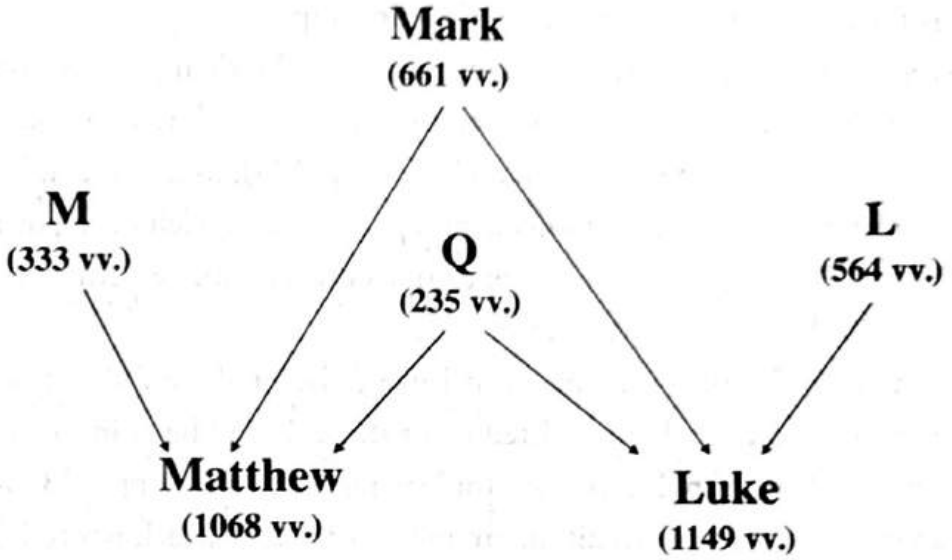
[52] See the detailed demonstration in Robert A. Derrenbacker Jr., *Ancient Compositional Practices and the Synoptic Problem* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005).

[53] D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 97. For still less likely options, see the latter part of my survey of contemporary perspectives in Craig L. Blomberg, "The Synoptic Problem: Where We Stand at the Start of a New Century," in *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, ed. David A. Black and David R. Beck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 17–40.



B. H. Streeter

7. Mark contains the highest incidence of Aramaic words preserved in Greek transliteration: for example, *Boanerges* (3:17), *talitha koum* (5:41), *Corban* (7:11), *ephphatha* (7:34), and *Abba* (14:36).[54]

8. There seems to be no credible explanation for why Mark would have omitted all of the material common to Matthew and Luke if he had known about it, since this includes much of Jesus's most beloved teaching (the Sermon on the Mount, numerous parables, instructions for establishing the church, etc.).

9. When one assumes that Matthew and Luke each redacted Mark, consistent patterns of theological emphasis emerge; on other theories, the patterns of editorial activity prove far less consistent.[55]

10. Applying the same principles that textual critics use to determine the oldest version of a given passage pays dividends as well in comparing parallel accounts between two Gospels.

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[54] These examples come from Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 59–63. For a wide-ranging study affirming a significant Aramaic substratum to the Gospel of Mark, see Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998).

[55] Cf. the unremarkable observations on Mark's putative use of Matthew, hardly adding up to any significant patterns, in C. S. Mann, *Mark* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986).

The kinds of changes that scribes regularly introduced to clarify, explain, or smooth out original readings more often than not resemble what Matthew and Luke would have done to Mark, if that is the correct way to explain their relationship.[56]

Weaknesses.[57] The most important arguments against Markan priority are:

1. Certain minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark do exist. Many of these may be attributed to overlap between Mark and Q (see p. 145), to natural changes in style or detail that writers might be expected to make independently of each other, or to reliance on other oral traditions. But these are all just suppositions that cannot be demonstrated; this is at least a small chink in the armor of Markan priority.

2. A large chunk of Mark is missing from Luke (Mark 6:45–8:26), often called Luke's "Great Omission." Would Luke have omitted all of this if it had been in one of his sources? But Luke probably had geographical reasons for leaving this out (see pp. 233–34).

3. The changes in the Gospel tradition are not as drastic if Mark wrote last rather than first. This may be true, but one dare not favor a view just because it is apologetically convenient. Our response to form criticism has demonstrated that there are plenty of other reasons for supporting the general trustworthiness of the Gospel tradition.

4. Markan priority is a hypothesis that was created primarily by modern, liberal scholars eager to find a miracle-free Jesus. Nevertheless, they did not succeed. Mark still has plenty of miracles, and the primary reasons for adopting Markan priority are independent of whatever motives may have prompted the exercise in the first place.

5. Strong patristic testimony supports Matthean priority. This is the one weighty objection to seeing Mark as having written first. Indeed, this external evidence fits certain internal evidence: Matthew's parallels to Mark do not as consistently seem to be later, editorial revisions as do Luke's parallels to Mark. We will suggest in our introduction to Matthew that there is a way to harmonize this evidence with the arguments for Markan priority, and that Matthew may have composed his Gospel in stages, partly before reading Mark and partly afterward.

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[56] See esp. Matthew C. Williams, *Two Gospels from One: A Comprehensive Text-Critical Analysis of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006). Cf. also Hyeon Woo Shin, *Textual Criticism and the Synoptic Problem in Historical Jesus Research: The Search for Valid Criteria* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004).

[57] The fullest critique remains Hans-Herbert Stoldt, *The History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis*, ed. Donald L. Niewyk (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1980).

The Q Hypothesis

In the early 1800s, Friedrich Schleiermacher first used the letter Q to designate a hypothetical document on which Matthew and Luke drew. This would account for the material not found in Mark that they shared—almost exclusively sayings of Jesus. Although scholars have not accepted this hypothesis as strongly as they have Markan priority, it still finds a fair consensus of support. Indeed, some scholars have been so convinced of it that they created the International Q Project to reconstruct a definitive version of the supposed original text based on when they believe Matthew offers the original wording and when Luke does.[58] An entire large commentary series then explains word by word or phrase by phrase how decisions were made on each supposed section of Q just as if we knew for sure such a text actually existed.[59]

Strengths. Why not simply assume that Luke used Matthew or vice versa? The most important reasons, which in turn support the Q hypothesis, include:

1. Although sufficient verbal parallelism occurs in places to suggest a literary relationship, and occasionally it is verbatim, the parallels are not as consistently close to each other overall as in the "triple tradition" (material found in all three Synoptics). This would be accounted for if both Matthew and Luke drew on a common source and redacted it independently of each other.

2. Sometimes Matthew seems to preserve the most literal/original account of Jesus's words; other times Luke does, with neither dominating. Often, too, Matthew's style is more Semitic (most notably, in preserving Hebrew parallelism), whereas Luke's order seems more original. Who, for example, would have actually taken Matthew's long sermons (like the Sermon on the Mount) and scattered parallels to them throughout his Gospel the way Luke would have had to if he were directly dependent on Matthew (what Streeter famously called a theory that "would only be tenable if, on other grounds, we had reason to believe he was a crank"[60])?

3. The oldest testimony about the formation of Matthew, from the early second-century Christian writer Papias, as quoted by Eusebius in the early 300s (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.16), says that "Matthew collected the oracles [of Jesus] in the Hebrew language [or 'dialect'] and everyone translated [or 'interpreted'] them as best he could." The Greek word for "oracles" (*logia*) most

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[58] James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffman, and John S. Kloppenborg, *The Critical Edition of Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

[59] Documenta *Q* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996–), 12 vols. to date.

[60] B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 183.

naturally means "sayings," not a full-fledged narrative Gospel, so perhaps Matthew himself was the author of something like Q before he (or a translator?) turned it into Greek.[61]

4. There is a general theological and stylistic homogeneity to a reconstructed Q. Recurring themes include teaching about wisdom, the more radical demands of itinerant ministry for the kingdom, the power and authority of Jesus, and a lively hope for the end of the age to come soon. Form critics have even given Q a plausible *Sitz im Leben*—the wandering preachers who continued the tradition of Matthew 10 and Luke 9–10 (the sending of the Twelve and seventy) throughout Galilee after Jesus's death.[62]

5. Attempts to explain Luke's direct use of Matthew (or Matthew's direct use of Luke) passage by passage sooner or later have to resort to very complex hypotheses about the later writers going through the earlier work several times sequentially or jumping around almost randomly. The same frequency or consistency of theological or stylistic patterns never emerges as when one examines Mark's use of Matthew and Luke.[63]

Weaknesses.[64] Above all, Q has never been discovered; it is a purely hypothetical document reconstructed by scholars. Still, the genre of a collection of Jesus's sayings is known to have existed, at least in heterodox Christian circles, with the *Gospel of Thomas*. The *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laërtius likewise compiles lengthy lists of key teachings of the subjects of its biographies. If the parallels between Matthew and Luke are not always close enough to suggest a written source, perhaps we should envision them

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[61] This was the view Schleiermacher proposed. Although not widely held today, comparatively recent defenders can still be found, most notably Matthew Black, "The Use of Rhetorical Terminology in Papias on Mark and Matthew," *JSNT* 37 (1989): 31–41; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (Dallas: Word, 1993), xlvi; and, though not expressed as confidently, Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Jesus and Judaism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 238.

[62] For an excellent introduction to the consensus perspective, see John S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville: WJKP, 2008). For a wide-ranging anthology of perspectives, see Christoph Heil, Gertraud Harb, and Daniel A. Smith, eds., *Built on Rock or Sand? Q Studies: Retrospects, Introspects and Prospects* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

[63] See, e.g., the extraordinarily convoluted process of Luke's use of Matthew posited throughout Allan J. McNicol, David L. Dungan, and David B. Peabody, *Beyond the Q Impasse: Luke's Use of Matthew* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1996). Toward the end of his very thorough study, Robert K. MacEwen acknowledges that the question remains unresolved, even though he favors the position indicated in his book's title. MacEwen, *Matthean Posteriority: An Exploration of Matthew's Use of Mark and Luke as a Solution to the Synoptic Problem* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 193.

[64] See esp. Mark Goodacre, *The Case against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2002); and Mark Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin, eds., *Questioning Q: A Multidimensional Critique* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

relying on a common oral tradition instead. There is also little agreement on the exact delineation of Q's contents, its order, or its purpose. As we noted already, to account for even the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark, proponents of Q usually have to postulate some overlap between the contents of Mark and Q. Some scholars prefer, therefore, to speak of a combination of shorter written and/or oral sources rather than one definite document.[65] Many scholars imagine that Q represents a complete Gospel of sorts so that by not including a Passion Narrative, it reflects a community that did not believe in Christ's atoning death. Others rightly recognize the implausibility of such a community existing early in the history of the Jesus movement and therefore reject the Q hypothesis. But both of these approaches fail to observe that an epitome of someone's sayings by definition does not represent everything that others may have deemed of importance about that individual's life—and death.[66]

We may push the issue even further. The Jesus that emerges from Q alone is very much *not* the classic exalted Lord of traditional Christian thought, and for precisely that reason he is attractive to many nontraditionalists.[67] But why should it be thought probable that a collection of some of a teacher's most memorable sayings should ever disclose all or even most of what is important to know about them? Moreover, if Matthew and Luke both incorporated most or all of Q into their Gospels, they must have believed that its theology was compatible with theirs.[68] Still other problems emerge when Q is divided into layers, assuming that an original apocalyptic document was supplemented later with sapiential (wisdom) sayings, or vice versa. Theories purporting to detect literary seams or theological tensions have led to some scholars finding even three or four levels of redaction,[69] at which point the amount of subjectivity (and often circular reasoning) makes virtually any theory too tenuous for common acceptance.

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[65] See esp. James D. G. Dunn, *The Oral Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), esp. 80–108; Terence C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency: Variability and Stability in the Synoptic Tradition and Q* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

[66] David Seeley, "Jesus' Death in Q," *NTS* 38 (1992): 222–34.

[67] Heike Omerzu, "Introduction: What Is at Stake by Advocating or Disputing the Two-Source Theory?" in *Gospel Interpretation and the Q-Hypothesis*, ed. Mogens Müller and Heike Omerzu (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 10.

[68] Alan Kirk, *Q in Matthew: Ancient Media, Memory, and Early Scribal Transmission of the Jesus Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 302.

[69] As in Yoseop Ra, *Q, the First Writing about Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016).

M, L, and Proto-Luke (and Other Sources?)

The most prominent twentieth-century proponent of Markan priority and the Q hypothesis was B. H. Streeter, an Englishman writing in the 1920s.[70] Streeter, however, went beyond the widely accepted "two-source hypothesis" to champion what came to be called the "four-source hypothesis." Streeter believed that, in addition to using Mark and Q, Matthew and Luke each had written sources of their own on which they drew; Streeter labeled these two additional sources "M" and "L," respectively. These supposed sources could account for much of the material unique to each of these two Gospels (333 verses in Matthew; 564 in Luke). Streeter also speculated that Luke wrote a first draft of his Gospel before seeing a copy of Mark ("proto-Luke") and then revised and expanded it considerably after reading Mark. This would account for the alternation of Markan and non-Markan material in Luke in large blocks as well as the larger percentage of non-Markan, non-Q material in Luke than in Matthew. But this is the most tenuous of Streeter's proposals and does not currently command consensus acclaim.

As for M and L, some scholars have claimed to see a theological homogeneity in this material,[71] but often it corresponds merely to the redactional interests of Matthew and Luke. What is more, if Matthew was written by the apostle with that name, the material unique to his Gospel could simply reflect his personal reminiscences.[72] A plausible case can be made for Luke having relied on either a Semitic source or a Greek source written in a style very similar to that of the Septuagint for chapters 1–2: this information about the conceptions and births of John and Jesus is written in a much more Hebraic or Hebraic-sounding style than the rest of his Gospel.[73] It is also possible that a parables source accounts for the large percentage of parables unique to Luke clustered in the central section of his Gospel (see p. 466). But beyond this, "M" and "L" remain highly speculative.

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[70] See his classic work, *The Four Gospels.*

[71] See esp. Stephenson H. Brooks, *Matthew's Community: The Evidence of His Special Sayings Material* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1987); Kim Paffenroth, *The Story of Jesus according to L* (Sheffield, UK: SAP, 1997).

[72] Nevertheless, evidence from the church fathers, esp. Ignatius, suggests that there may have been an "M," because a disproportionately large percentage of their quotations from Matthew comes from the unparalleled portions of Matthew's Gospel.

[73] For a Semitic source, see Stephen C. Farris, *The Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1985); for a Septuagintalized Greek source, see Chang-Wook Jung, *The Original Language of the Lukan Infancy Narrative* (London: Continuum, 2004).

A handful of scholars have suggested a "three-document" hypothesis whereby Markan priority and the Q hypothesis are supplemented by the notion that Luke also used Matthew. This can then deal with the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark without having to appeal at every juncture to supposed Mark-Q overlap.[74] Delbert Burkett has revived the idea that all three Synoptic Gospels relied on a source similar but not identical to Mark to deal with the same problem. Perhaps Mark himself wrote two editions of his work.[75] And there are still other possibilities.

The heavy reliance of ancient historians on numerous oral and written sources, alongside any eyewitness participation in events they may have had, leads us to assume that a comprehensive solution to the Synoptic problem may be quite complex and irrecoverable. Some literary dependence, especially of Matthew and Luke on Mark, seems likely, but some of the more distant parallels are probably due to oral tradition. Q may be a little more probable than Luke's direct use of Matthew or vice versa, but what typically gets included in Q may also be too generous. It may have been a shorter document, supplemented again by oral traditions or other written sources. What Streeter called M and L may yet again be any manner of combination of oral and written sources and, if the apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel that bears his name, some of "M" could also reflect his "memory"! Ockham's razor—the principle that the simpler hypothesis is to be preferred to the more complicated one—was developed for philosophy, not for history.[76] In fact, it is usually misleading when applied to historical study, because history tends to be very complicated, messy, and unpredictable.

To the beginning student, all this discussion of Gospel source criticism often seems irrelevant to their interests, but it is actually a crucial discipline in several respects. For those interested in the question of the historical reliability of these documents, it is important to understand as best as possible how they were formed. For example, if Q existed, it would probably be dated to the 40s or 50s. This puts us within ten to twenty years of the crucifixion and considerably shortens the period in which the Gospel traditions circulated exclusively by word of mouth. For those interested in the theological distinctives of the different evangelists, it is

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[74] See, e.g., Bird, *Gospel of the Lord*, 156–87, drawing on Heinrich J. Holtzmann and Robert H. Gundry.

[75] Delbert Burkett, *The Case for Proto-Mark: A Study in the Synoptic Problem* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

[76] Craig L. Blomberg, "When Ockham's Razor Shaves Too Closely: A Necessarily Complex Model for the Development of the Jesus Tradition," in *Texts and Contexts: Gospels and Pauline Studies*, ed. Todd Still (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 53.

equally crucial to know who wrote first and who edited which document. Then one can separate tradition from redaction and have a better grasp of the unique emphases of each writer. That brings us naturally to phase three of the developing Gospel tradition: redaction criticism.

Redaction Criticism: The Editorial Contributions of the Synoptic Evangelists[77]

Again a trio of Germans is responsible for vaulting this discipline into prominence: Günther Bornkamm on Matthew, Willi Marxsen on Mark, and Hans Conzelmann on Luke.[78] A good working definition of the method they pioneered explains that redaction criticism "seeks to lay bare the theological perspectives of a biblical writer by analyzing the editorial (redactional) and compositional techniques and interpretations employed by him in shaping and framing the written and/or oral traditions at hand."[79] One may subdivide redaction criticism into two complementary tasks: *reading horizontally* and *reading vertically*.[80] Reading horizontally involves looking *across* a gospel synopsis to compare the differences among parallels and to determine how later writers altered their sources. Reading vertically refers to looking *down* the given column of a synopsis (and hence throughout the larger context of a specific Gospel) to see what themes and other editorial distinctives repeatedly recur and whether or not they are paralleled in the other Gospels. It also involves looking for editorial seams, summaries, introductions, and conclusions, and the outline or arrangement of material. All told, one can get a good feel for a given writer's emphases through these procedures.

As with form criticism, redaction criticism has often been used by more radical critics to deprecate the historical reliability of the Gospels. Some falsely assume that what is told for

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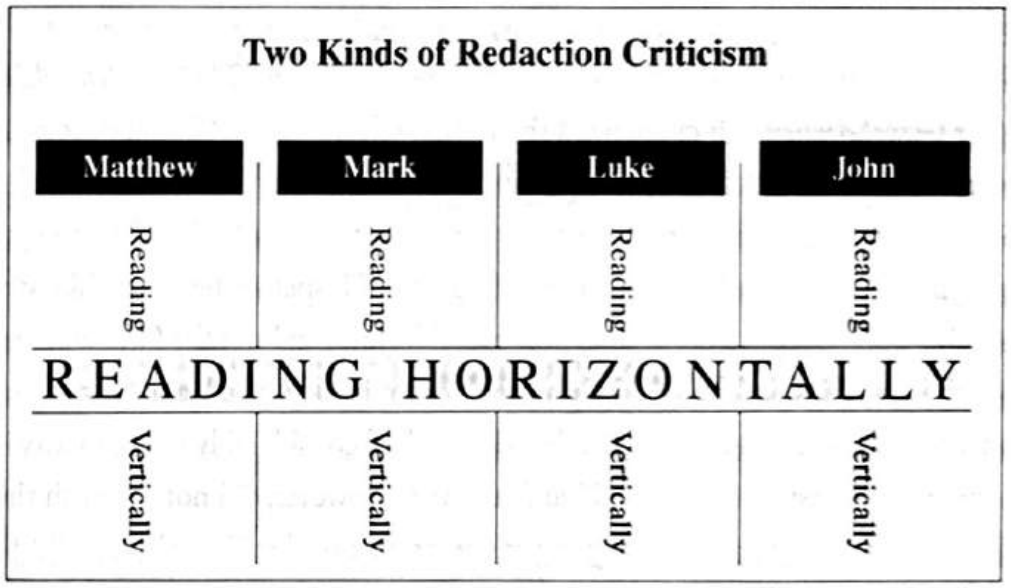
[77] For excellent introductions, see D. A. Carson, "Redaction Criticism: On the Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of a Literary Tool," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 119–42; and Grant R. Osborne, "Redaction Criticism," in *Interpreting the New Testament*, ed. David A. Black and David S. Dockery, 128–49.

[78] Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963); Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969); Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

[79] Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: WJKP, 2001), 158.

[80] Cf. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 140–46.

theological purposes is less likely to be historical than is a mere recitation of facts. Indeed, often the opposite is the case, as people passionately committed to a cause want the facts to be known. Post-Holocaust Jews insisted the story of the atrocities in Nazi Germany be told and retold so that such horrors might never recur. They had a much greater vested interest in the truth than those "revisionist" historians who argued that the Holocaust had been vastly exaggerated.[81] Redaction critics also often allege that what the Gospel writers added to their sources cannot be historical, ruling out the possibility of additional written or oral sources beyond Mark and Q, or in Matthew's case, personal memory. Others exaggerate the extent to which minor stylistic variations reflect theological motives. Some use a fairly atomistic form of analysis, counting word frequencies to determine characteristic vocabulary and confidently pronouncing on the traditional or redactional origin of almost every word or phrase in a passage. This, in fact, goes far beyond anything we can know for sure. With all the attention to diversity, one can lose sight of the substantial amount of agreement among the three Synoptics.



The value of redaction criticism stripped of these methodological improprieties and excesses, however, remains great, perhaps even more than that of source or form criticism. As an interpretive tool, it is equivalent to asking the question of each passage in the Gospels: "Why did the Gospel writer choose to include this in precisely the way he did?" Readers of the Gospels from the beginning of church history have recognized that the different writers had

[81] Cf. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 499–505.

different theological emphases. The church's preoccupation with constructing harmonies of the life of Christ generally blurred these distinctions. Ironically, it is often those more conservative Christians, who insist most strongly on the inspiration and inerrancy of the very texts the evangelists penned, who pay least attention to the form in which those texts were inspired, opting instead to study an artificial, human-made synthesis of the four.

Surely, such harmonies have a legitimate place, and, indeed, our survey of the life of Christ below will make cautious use of them.[82] But we dare not lose sight of the fact that God inspired four Gospels, not one, and presumably for a reason! Every preacher choosing a text from the Gospels should, therefore, want to stress what the original author intended. For example, if one determines to preach on the feeding of the five thousand (a passage occurring in all four Gospels), the sermon should sound slightly different depending on which account one follows. The preacher must research that author's emphases and make the sermon correspond accordingly. Sadly, this is seldom done. In our introductions to each of the four Gospels, however, we shall highlight a variety of these distinctives and point out others at the conclusions of most major sections of our survey of the life of Christ.

In 1998 a collection of essays edited by Richard Bauckham, titled *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*,[83] challenged the notion of an original Christian congregation or group of congregations to which each Gospel was initially intended. They certainly showed that modern Gospel critics have often read far too much about the readers' probable circumstances out of the varying details of the four Gospels and that the Gospel writers most likely envisioned their works being copied repeatedly and distributed widely throughout the Christian world. Both as a result of these studies and due to the proliferation of in-depth redactional analyses of most passages in the Gospels, redaction criticism has diminished considerably in popularity in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Bauckham's essayists, however, did not establish the improbability of the earliest Christian testimony about the origins of the Gospels, nor did they try to. Moreover, to the extent that churches formed along the lines of other voluntary associations in the Greco-Roman world, they would have wanted a certain amount of foundational documentary

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[82] Indeed, harmonization and redaction criticism can actually work hand in hand: the former demonstrating that passages are not contradictory; the latter explaining why they do differ in the ways they do. See Craig L. Blomberg, "The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 135–74.

[83] Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

in-house texts, and the Gospels could readily have functioned in this fashion.[84] So it would seem that a cautious use of redaction criticism in keeping with that testimony is still appropriate, even while recognizing that the Gospels were also disseminated quickly and widely.[85]

Conclusion

At the beginning of the 1960s, after more than a century and a half of the analysis of Gospel sources, Stephen Neill could declare Markan priority one of the assured results of biblical criticism.[86] Only months later, William Farmer fired his broadside against it, in support of Mark being the last rather than the first of the three Synoptics. In the 1970s, university departments of religious studies taught form and redaction criticism as the two most foundational tools of Gospel studies. By the 1980s, canon criticism had clearly established itself within this panoply of tools. Today Markan priority remains reasonably secure but not without the recognition that oral tradition continued strongly to influence the development of the Synoptics. Q, meanwhile, has to compete with alternative theories more than it has had to in over half a century. Form criticism in its classic, Bultmannian form has all but vanished from the earth, but the interest in the oral tradition, whether memorized, transmitted with flexibility but within fixed limits, or considered from the vantage point of social memory, continues to flourish. Indeed, study of the ways it may have been retold has given rise to a small but vibrant discipline known as "performance criticism."[87] The practice of classic redaction criticism still takes place but without nearly as large a percentage of the guild as was captivated by it a mere twenty years ago. We have already seen in chapter 3 the burgeoning of social-scientific analysis and all the many advocacy movements it helped to spawn. But perhaps the greatest interest

[84] Richard Last, "Communities That Write: Christ-Groups, Associations, and Gospel Communities," *NTS* 58 (2012): 173–98. Last fails, however, to take adequately into account the differences between the Gospels and these documents, not least an evangelistic purpose, when he rejects my "both-and" approach. The earliest churches were also not first of all communities of self-interest, as he calls them, like many other voluntary associations were.

[85] Craig L. Blomberg, "The Gospels for Specific Communities *and* All Christians," in *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*, ed. Edward W. Klink III (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 111–33. Cf. also the conclusions of Justin M. Smith, *Why* Βίος*? On the Relationship between Gospel Genre and Implied Audience* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

[86] Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1961* (Oxford: OUP, 1964), 108, 339.

[87] See esp. the Bible Performance Criticism series from Cascade Books (Eugene, OR, 2009–), with at least fourteen volumes published through 2020.

today across the board lies in the next logical development after all the historical methods are exhausted, namely, literary criticism and its subsidiary, genre criticism. These, along with a brief look at canon criticism, will be the focus of attention in chapter 5.

Questions for Review

1. What are source, form, and redaction criticism? How does each method work? From an evangelical perspective, what are the strengths and weaknesses of each?
2. Specifically with regard to form criticism, what evidence must temper various theories of unbridled creativity among those who first handed down traditions about Jesus?
3. Why is Markan priority the most common solution to the Synoptic problem? Which arguments in its favor seem strongest? Which arguments against it seem strongest? What are the Q, M, and L hypotheses? What are their relative merits?
4. Why is it important to understand the literary interrelationship of the Gospels? Why is it necessary to postulate such a relationship at all?

For Further Study

Because this chapter has surveyed several different disciplines, key bibliography for each individual discipline has already appeared in the footnotes. Here we will simply list several key works that treat not just one but two or three of the critical methods surveyed here or that have a focus overlapping with two or three of them. Several treat or overlap with a larger group of methods as well. An attractive distinctive of the volume by Green is that all writers illustrate the methods they discuss with reference to the same texts: Luke 3:1–20; John 4:1–42; 1 Cor 11:2–34; Jas 4:13–5:6; and Rev 5.

Introductory

Black, David A., and David S. Dockery, eds. *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*. Rev. ed. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001.

Dunn, James D. G. *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

Eve, Eric. *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014.

Mangum, Douglas, and Amy Balogh, eds. *Social and Historical Approaches to the Bible*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016.

McKnight, Scot. *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988.

Rodríguez, Rafael. *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed.* London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014.

Wenham, David. *From Good News to Gospels: What Did the First Christians Say about Jesus?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018.

Intermediate

Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017.

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