

Comparing Source, Form, Redaction and Literary Criticism in terms of
Assumption about History and Focused Goals

Advance Studies in the Synoptic Gospels

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Introduction: Background and Basic Characteristics of Criticism

Inquiry into the origins of the New Testament can be dated back to the nineteenth and twentieth century. Though several critical opinions were offered prior to the 1800, none were known to offer substantial detail regarding the origin of the New Testament. Reformers such as Martin Luther made statements about some New Testament books, but only regarding their unsuitability for directly supporting the doctrine of justification by faith. At any rate, the age of reason gave rise to modern criticism which subjected the bible text to the scrutiny of human reasoning. Rationalism had been enthroned and all else revelation included, was to bow down to it. The rise of criticism out of such backgrounds then draws attention to the anthropological character, and this raises problems. There was no doubt in the minds of the earliest modern critical scholars that human reason should be allowed to pronounce on the authenticity of the text. It was this tendency for modern criticism to exult itself above the clear statement of the New Testament, that led to the development both of skeptical schools of thought, and of strong reactions from those committed to the absolute trustworthiness of the Bible. It is thus important to understand this background when approaching NT criticism.¹

The thesis of this paper will be to compare source, form, redaction and literary criticism in terms of their assumptions about history and their focused goals. I will begin by defining each criticism, discussing their assumptions about history, and explaining their focused goals. I will then move on to interact with the material, comparing each criticism against each other in terms of their assumptions about history and their focal goals.

¹ R. K Harrison, B. K. Waltke, D. Guthrie, G. D. Fee, *Biblical Criticism, Historical, Literary, and Textual* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 85-7.

Source Criticism

Source criticism is considered the oldest of the modern criticisms. It first appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when scholars began to read the bible from a secular perspective. Close reading of certain scripture passages revealed various discrepancies, contradictions, and changes in literary style. In the NT, issues of source criticism revolved around explaining the verbal similarities between extensive portions of Matthew, Mark, Luke.² In 1796 J. G. Herder sought to explain the synoptic problem by assuming a common oral tradition used by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Gieseler in 1818 more fully developed Herder's theory explaining that the disciples created this oral tradition which soon became fixed in form. Some time after it was translated into Greek, this common tradition was then used by the synoptic writers. Though there is no doubt about a period when the gospels circulated orally, it must be noted that at times, the degree of similarities seems to require more than just a common oral tradition. Not minimizing the significance of a common oral tradition on the gospel writers, a good number of scholars agree that the similarities we encounter require the existence of some sort of a literary relationship. If a literary relationship existed between the synoptic gospels, then what was the nature of these relationships? Three of the most common of these interdependent hypotheses are:

1. Matthew wrote first, Mark used Matthew, Luke used Mark. (Augustine)
2. Matthew wrote first, Luke used Matthew, Mark used Matthew and Luke. (J. J. Griesbach 1783, and 1789; W. R. Farmer 1964).

²Richard Soulen and Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 178-179.

3. Mark wrote first, Matthew used Mark, Luke used Mark. Matthew and Luke also used another source “Q”, (H. J. Holtzmann, 1863; B. H. Streeter, 1924).

Of the three listed, the last two, the Griesbach Hypothesis and the Two-document hypothesis are the most debated.³

Form Criticism

Partly because of the multiplication of sources and partly due to the doubts cast on the historical value of Mark, source criticism developed into form criticism. Scholars recognized that source criticism had concentrated on the use of written material without paying enough attention to the origins of these sources. The questions of how Mark and Q reached the form Matthew and Luke came to use became the focal point. Hence the focus reverted back to the period of oral tradition, and scholars endeavored to clarify the way in which the tradition was preserved. Using a circular approach, they decided that a valuable method of doing this would be to analyze the shape or form of the various units of tradition and classify them accordingly. Though form criticism began as a strictly literary discipline, it was tempting for some to use forms to determine historical validity. Hence, many of the judgments made by form critics became negative, as they were the product of highly doubtful methods. According to form criticism different forms existed in the synoptic gospels, some consisted of narratives, some consisted of sayings, some of miracles, and some of the so-called mythical or legendary material. Not all scholars accepted the classification of myths and legends, which presupposed a non- historical content. The more extreme form critics rejected the miraculous, because in their view miracles

³ Joel Green, Scot Mcknight, Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 784-87.

did not belong to the sphere of history. As for myths, according to this school of form critics, anything supernatural in the accounts of the temptation, the transfiguration etc, were all ruled out. It is clear that scholars who approached the literary forms from different points of view evaluated them differently. Needless to say, a valuable feature of form criticism has been the attention given to the oral transmission, which had long been neglected by most source critics.⁴

Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism arose out of form criticism and was directly based on it. This method switched its attention to the evangelist as writers. This criticism gained much support because it attempts a more positive approach. It regards the writers more as authors rather than editors. The main emphasis is placed on the evangelist as theologians and little attention is paid to them as historians. The German scholars Bornkamm, Marxsen, Conzelmann, and Haenchen devoted their attention to Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts respectively. All saw their authors as having used and manipulated their material to express their theological view points. In due course, some redaction critics took this view too far. Conzelmann evaluated Luke's geographical details with theological meaning. Theological interest suddenly took precedence over historical validity. Luke and the other evangelist would be considered as theologians and not historians. As it would be difficult to conceive of the narrations as conveying bare fact with some interpretation, yet being historical valid. But there is no reason to see the interpretations made by each evangelist as his own creation. On the contrary, there is sufficient agreement among them for us to regard the

⁴ Harrison, Waltke, & Guthrie, 104-7.

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