

BIBLE CRITICISM

Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 86-91.

Bible Criticism. *Criticism* as applied to the Bible simply means the exercise of judgment. Both conservative and nonconservative scholars engage in two forms of biblical criticism: *lower criticism* deals with the text; *higher criticism* treats the source of the text. Lower criticism attempts to determine what the original text said, and the latter asks who said it and when, where, and why it was written.

Most controversies surrounding Bible criticism involve higher criticism. Higher criticism can be divided into negative (destructive) and positive (constructive) types. Negative criticism denies the authenticity of much of the biblical record. Usually an antisupernatural presupposition (*see* MIRACLES, ARGUMENTS AGAINST; MIRACLES, MYTH AND) is employed in this critical approach. Further, negative criticism often approaches the Bible with distrust equivalent to a “guilty-until-proven-innocent” bias.

Negative New Testament Criticism. *Historical, Source, Form, Tradition, and Redaction* methods (and combinations thereof) are the approaches with the worst record for bias. Any of these, used to advance an agenda of skepticism, with little or no regard for truth, undermine the Christian apologetic.

Historical Criticism. Historical criticism is a broad term that covers techniques to date documents and traditions, to verify events reported in those documents, and to use the results in historiography to reconstruct and interpret. The French Oratorian priest Richard Simon published a series of books, beginning in 1678, in which he applied a rationalistic, critical approach to studying the Bible. This was the birth of historical-critical study of the Bible, although not until Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827) and Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791) was the modern historical-critical pattern set. They were influenced by the secular historical research of Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831; *Romische Geschichte*, 1811–12), Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886; *Geshichte der romanischen und germanischen Volker von 1494–1535*), and others, who developed and refined the techniques. Among those influenced was Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810–1877). He combined elements of Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), and orthodox Lutheranism with historical categories and the critical methods to make a biblical-theological synthesis. This model stressed “superhistorical history,” “holy history,” or “salvation history” (*Heilsgeschichte*)—the sorts of history that need not be literally true. His ideas and terms influenced Karl Barth (1886–1968), Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), and others in the twentieth century. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, capable orthodox scholars challenged “destructive criticism” and its rationalistic theology.

Among more conservative scholars were George Salmon (1819–1904), Theodor von Zahn (1838–1933), and R. H. Lightfoot (1883–1953), who used criticism methods as the bases for a constructive criticism. This constructive criticism manifests itself most openly when it considers such matters as miracles, virgin birth of Jesus, and bodily resurrection of Christ (*see* RESURRECTION, EVIDENCE FOR). Historical criticism is today taken for granted in biblical studies.

Much recent work in historical criticism manifests rationalistic theology that at the same time claims to uphold traditional Christian doctrine. As a result, it has given rise to such developments as source criticism.

Source Criticism. Source criticism, also known as literary criticism, attempts to discover and define literary sources used by the biblical writers. It seeks to uncover underlying literary sources, classify types of literature, and answer questions relating to authorship, unity, and date of Old and New Testament materials (Geisler, 436). Some literary critics tend to decimate the biblical text, pronounce certain books inauthentic, and reject the very notion of verbal inspiration. Some scholars have carried their rejection of authority to the point that they have modified the idea of the canon (e.g., with regard to pseudonymity) to accommodate their own conclusions (ibid., 436). Nevertheless, this difficult but important undertaking can be a valuable aid to biblical interpretation, since it has bearing on the historical value of biblical writings. In addition, careful literary criticism can prevent historical misinterpretations of the biblical text.

Source criticism in the New Testament over the past century has focused on the so-called “Synoptic problem,” since it relates to difficulties surrounding attempts to devise a scheme of literary dependence that accounts for similarities and dissimilarities among the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Theories tend to work with the idea of a now-absent *Q* or *Quelle* (“Source”) used by the three evangelists, who wrote in various sequences, with the second depending on the first and the third on the other two. These theories were typical forerunners of the Two-Source theory advanced by B. H. Streeter (1874–1937), which asserted the priority of Mark and eventually gained wide acceptance among New Testament scholars. Streeter’s arguments have been questioned, and his thesis has been challenged by others. Eta Linnemann, once a student of Bultmann and a critic, has written a strong critique of her former position in which she uses source analysis to conclude that no synoptic problem in fact exists. She insists that each Gospel writer wrote an independent account based on personal experience and individual information. She wrote: “As time passes, I become more and more convinced that to a considerable degree New Testament criticism as practiced by those committed to historical-critical theology does not deserve to be called science” (Linnemann, 9). Elsewhere she writes, “The Gospels are not works of literature that creatively reshape already finished material after the manner in which Goethe reshaped the popular book about Dr. Faust” (ibid., 104). Rather, “Every Gospel presents a complete, unique testimony. It owes its existence to direct or indirect eyewitnesses” (ibid., 194).

Form Criticism. Form criticism studies literary forms, such as essays, poems, and myths, since different writings have different forms. Often the form of a piece of literature can tell a great deal about the nature of a literary piece, its writer, and its social context. Technically this is termed its “life setting” (*Sitz im Leben*). The classic liberal position is the documentary or J-E-P-D Pentateuchal source analysis theory established by Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) and his followers (see PENTATEUCH, MOSAIC AUTHORSHIP OF). They actually attempted to mediate between traditionalism and skepticism, dating Old Testament books in a less supernaturalistic manner by applying the “documentary theory.” These documents are identified as the “Jahwist” or Jehovistic (J), dated in the ninth century B.C., the Elohist (E), eighth century, the Deuteronomist (D), from about the time of Josiah (640–609), and the Priestly (P), from perhaps the fifth century B.C. So attractive was the evolutionary concept in literary criticism that the source theory of Pentateuchal origins began to prevail over all opposition. A mediating position of some aspects of the theory was expressed by C. F. A. Dillman (1823–1894), Rudolph Kittel (1853–1929), and others. Opposition to the documentary theory was expressed by Franz

Delitzsch (1813–1890), who rejected the hypothesis outright in his commentary on Genesis, William Henry Green (1825–1900), James Orr (1844–1913), A. H. Sayce (1845–1933), Wilhelm Möller, Eduard Naville, Robert Dick Wilson (1856–1930), and others (see Harrison, 239–41; Archer; Pfeiffer). Sometimes form-critical studies are marred by doctrinaire assumptions, including that early forms must be short and later forms longer, but, in general, form criticism has been of benefit to biblical interpretation. Form criticism has been most profitably used in the study of the Psalms (Wenham, “History and the Old Testament,” 40).

These techniques were introduced into New Testament study of the Gospels as *Formgeschichte* (“form history”) or *form criticism*. Following in the tradition of Heinrich Paulus and Wilhelm De Wette (1780–1849), among others, scholars at Tübingen built on the foundation of source criticism theory. They advocated the priority of Mark as the earliest Gospel and multiple written sources. William Wrede (1859–1906) and other form critics sought to eliminate the chronological-geographical framework of the Synoptic Gospels and to investigate the twenty-year period of oral traditions between the close of New Testament events and the earliest written accounts of those events. They attempted to classify this material into “forms” of oral tradition and to discover the historical situation (*Sitz im Leben*) within the early church that gave rise to these forms. These units of tradition are usually assumed to reflect more of the life and teaching of the early church than the life and teaching of the historical Jesus. Forms in which the units are cast are clues to their relative historical value.

The fundamental assumption of form criticism is typified by Martin Dibelius (1883–1947) and Bultmann. By creating new words and deeds of Jesus as the situation demanded, the evangelists arranged the units of oral tradition and created artificial contexts to serve their own purposes. In challenging the authorship, date, structure, and style of other New Testament books, destructive critics arrived at similar conclusions. To derive a fragmented New Testament theology, they rejected Pauline authorship for all Epistles traditionally ascribed to him except Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Galatians (Hodges, 339–48).

Thoroughgoing form critics hold two basic assumptions: (1) The early Christian community had little or no genuine biographical interest or integrity, so it created and transformed oral tradition to meet its own needs. (2) The evangelists were compiler-editors of individual, isolated units of tradition that they arranged and rearranged without regard for historical reality (see Thomas and Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* [281–82], who identify Dibelius, Bultmann, Burton S. Easton, R. H. Lightfoot, Vincent Taylor, and D. E. Nineham as preeminent New Testament form critics).

Tradition Criticism. Tradition criticism is primarily concerned with the history of traditions before they were recorded in writing. The stories of the patriarchs, for example, were probably passed down through generations by word of mouth until they were written as a continuous narrative. These oral traditions may have been changed over the long process of transmission. It is of great interest to the biblical scholar to know what changes were made and how the later tradition, now enshrined in a literary source, differs from the earliest oral version.

Tradition criticism is less certain or secure than literary criticism because it begins where literary criticism leaves off, with conclusions that are in themselves uncertain. It is difficult to check the hypotheses about development of an oral tradition (Wenham, *ibid.*, 40–41). Even more tenuous is the “liturgical tradition” enunciated by S. Mowinckel and his Scandinavian associates, who argue that literary origins were related to preexilic sanctuary rituals and sociological phenomena. An offshoot of the liturgical approach is the “myth and ritual” school of S. H. Hooke, which argues that a distinctive set of rituals and myths were common to all Near Eastern

peoples, including the Hebrews. Both of these approaches use Babylonian festival analogies to support their variations on the classical literary-critical and tradition-critical themes (Harrison, 241).

Form criticism is closely aligned with tradition criticism in New Testament studies. A review of many of the basic assumptions in view of the New Testament text have been made by Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, and I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology and I Believe in the Historical Jesus*. Also see the discussions in Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* and *Introduction to the New Testament as Canon*, and Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* and *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*.

Redaction Criticism. Redaction criticism is more closely associated with the text than is traditional criticism. As a result, it is less open to the charge of subjective speculation. Redaction (editorial) critics can achieve absolute certainty only when all the sources are used that were at the disposal of the redactor (editor), since the task is to determine how a redactor compiled sources, what was omitted, what was added, and what particular bias was involved in the process. At best, the critic has only some of the sources available, such as the books of Kings used by the writers of Chronicles. Elsewhere, in both the Old and the New Testaments, the sources must be reconstructed out of the edited work itself. Then redaction criticism becomes much less certain as a literary device (Wenham, “Gospel Origins,” 439).

Redaction critics tend to favor a view that biblical books were written much later and by different authors than the text relates. Late theological editors attached names out of history to their works for the sake of prestige and credibility. In Old and New Testament studies this view arose from historical criticism, source criticism, and form criticism. As a result, it adopts many of the same presuppositions, including the documentary hypothesis in the Old Testament, and the priority of Mark in the New Testament.

Evaluation. As already noted, higher criticism can be helpful as long as critics are content with analysis based on what can be objectively known or reasonably theorized. Real criticism doesn’t begin its work with the intent to subvert the authority and teaching of Scripture.

Kinds of Criticism Contrasted. However, much of modern biblical criticism springs from unbiblical philosophical presuppositions exposed by Gerhard Maier in *The End of the Historical Critical Method*. These presuppositions incompatible with Christian faith include deism, materialism, skepticism, agnosticism, Hegelian idealism, and existentialism. Most basic is a prevailing naturalism (antisupernaturalism) that is intuitively hostile to any document containing miracle stories (*see* MIRACLES IN THE BIBLE; MIRACLES, MYTH AND). This naturalistic bias divides negative (destructive) from positive (constructive) higher criticism:

	Positive Criticism (Constructive)	Negative Criticism (Destructive)
Basis	Supernaturalistic	Naturalistic
Rule	Text is “innocent until proven guilty”	Text is “guilty until proven innocent”
Result	Bible is wholly true	Bible is partly true

Final Authority

Word of God

Mind of man

Role of Reason

To discover truth (rationality) To determine truth
(rationalism)

Some of the negative presuppositions call for scrutiny, especially as they relate to the Gospel record. This analysis is especially relevant to source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism, as these methods challenge the genuineness, authenticity, and consequently the divine authority of the Bible. This kind of biblical criticism is unfounded.

Unscholarly bias. It imposes its own antisupernatural bias on the documents. The originator of modern negative criticism, Benedict Spinoza, for example, declared that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, nor Daniel the whole book of Daniel, nor did any miracle recorded actually occur. Miracles, he claimed, are scientifically and rationally impossible.

In the wake of Spinoza, negative critics concluded that Isaiah did not write the whole book of Isaiah. That would have involved supernatural predictions (including knowing the name of King Cyrus) over 100 years in advance (*see* PROPHECY AS PROOF OF THE BIBLE). Likewise, negative critics concluded Daniel could not have been written until 165 B.C. That late authorship placed it after the fulfillment of its detailed description of world governments and rulers down to Antiochus IV Epiphanes (d. 163 B.C.). Supernatural predictions of coming events was not considered an option. The same naturalistic bias was applied to the New Testament by David Strauss (1808–1874), Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), and Bultmann, with the same devastating results.

The foundations of this antisupernaturalism crumbled with evidence that the universe began with a big bang (*see* EVOLUTION, COSMIC). Even agnostics such as Robert Jastrow (Jastrow, 18), speak of “supernatural” forces at work (Kenny, 66; *see* AGNOSTICISM; MIRACLE; MIRACLES, ARGUMENTS AGAINST), so it is sufficient to note here that, with the demise of modern antisupernaturalism, there is no philosophical basis for destructive criticism.

Inaccurate view of authorship. Negative criticism either neglects or minimizes the role of apostles and eyewitnesses who recorded the events. Of the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and John were definitely eyewitnesses of the events they report. Luke was a contemporary and careful historian (Luke 1:1–4; *see* Acts). Indeed, every book of the New Testament was written by a contemporary or eyewitness of Christ. Even such critics as the “Death-of-God” theologian John A. T. Robinson admit that the Gospels were written between 40 and 65 (Robinson, 352), during the life of eyewitnesses.

But if the basic New Testament documents were composed by eyewitnesses, then much of destructive criticism fails. It assumes the passage of much time while “myths” developed. Studies have revealed that it takes two generations for a myth to develop (Sherwin-White, 190).

What Jesus really said. It wrongly assumes that the New Testament writers did not distinguish between their own words and those of Jesus. That a clear distinction was made between Jesus’ words and those of the Gospel writers is evident from the ease by which a “red letter” edition of the New Testament can be made. Indeed, the apostle Paul is clear to distinguish his own words from those of Jesus (*see* Acts 20:35; 1 Cor. 7:10, 12, 25). So is John the apostle in the Apocalypse (*see* Rev. 1:8, 11, 17b–20; 2:1f.; 22:7, 12–16, 20b). In view of this care, the New

Testament critic is unjustified in assuming without substantive evidence that the Gospel record does not actually report what Jesus said and did.

Myths? It incorrectly assumes that the New Testament stories are like folklore and myth. There is a vast difference between the simple New Testament accounts of miracles and the embellished myths that did arise during the second and third centuries A.D., as can be seen by comparing the accounts. New Testament writers explicitly disavow myths. Peter declared: “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales (mythos) when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16). Paul also warned against belief in myths (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14).

One of the most telling arguments against the myth view was given by C. S. Lewis:

First then, whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading . . . If he tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he had read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel . . . I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. [Lewis, 154–55]

Creators or recorders? Unfounded higher criticism undermines the integrity of the New Testament writers by claiming that Jesus never said (or did) what the Gospels claim. Even some who call themselves evangelical have gone so far as to claim that what “ ‘Jesus said’ or ‘Jesus did’ need not always mean that in history Jesus said or did what follows, but sometimes may mean that in the account at least partly constructed by Matthew himself Jesus said or did what follows” (Gundry, 630). This clearly undermines confidence in the truthfulness of the Gospels and the accuracy of the events they report. On this critical view the Gospel writers become creators of the events, not recorders.

Of course, every careful biblical scholar knows that one Gospel writer does not always use the same words in reporting what Jesus said as does another. However, they always convey the same meaning. They do select, summarize, and paraphrase, but they do not distort. A comparison of the parallel reports in the Gospels is ample evidence of this.

There is no substantiation for the claim of one New Testament scholar that Matthew created the Magi story (Matt. 2) out of the turtledove story (of Luke 2). For according to Robert Gundry, Matthew “changes the sacrificial slaying of ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,’ at the presentation of the baby Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:24; cf. Lev. 12:6–8), into Herod’s slaughtering of the babies in Bethlehem” (ibid., 34–35). Such a view not only degrades the integrity of the Gospel writers but the authenticity and authority of the Gospel record. It is also silly.

Neither is there support for Paul K. Jewett, who went so far as to assert (Jewett, 134–35) that what the apostle Paul affirmed in 1 Corinthians 11:3 is wrong. If Paul is in error, then the time-honored truth that “what the Bible says, God says” is not so. Indeed, if Jewett is right, then even when one discovers what the author of Scripture is affirming, he is little closer to knowing the truth of God (cf. Gen. 3:1). If “what the Bible says, God says” (*see* BIBLE, EVIDENCE FOR) is not so, then the divine authority of all Scripture is worthless.

The early church’s stake in truth. That the early church had no real biographical interest is highly improbable. The New Testament writers, impressed as they were with the belief that Jesus

was the long-promised Messiah, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16–18), had great motivation to accurately record what he actually said and did.

To say otherwise is contrary to their own clear statements. John claimed that “Jesus did” the things recorded in his Gospel (John 21:25). Elsewhere John said “What . . . we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we beheld and our hands handled . . . we proclaim to you also” (1 John 1:1–2).

Luke clearly manifests an intense biographical interest by the earliest Christian communities when he wrote: “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1–4). To claim, as the critics do, that the New Testament writers lacked interest in recording real history is implausible.

The work of the Holy Spirit. Such assumptions also neglect or deny the role of the Holy Spirit in activating the memories of the eyewitnesses. Much of the rejection of the Gospel record is based on the assumption that the writers could not be expected to remember sayings, details, and events twenty or forty years after the events. For Jesus died in 33, and the first Gospel records probably came (at latest) between 50 and 60 (Wenham, “Gospel Origins,” 112–34).

Again the critic is rejecting or neglecting the clear statement of Scripture. Jesus promised his disciples, “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26).

So even on the unlikely assumption that no one recorded anything Jesus said during his lifetime or immediately after, the critics would have us believe that eyewitnesses whose memories were later supernaturally activated by the Holy Spirit did not accurately record what Jesus did and said. It seems far more likely that the first-century eyewitnesses were right and the twentieth-century critics are wrong, than the reverse.

Guidelines for Biblical Criticism. Of course biblical scholarship need not be destructive. But the biblical message must be understood in its theistic (supernatural) context and its actual historical and grammatical setting. Positive guidelines for evangelical scholarship are set forth in Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics” (see Geisler, *Summit II: Hermeneutics*, 10–13. Also Radmacher and Preus, *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, esp. 881–914). It reads in part as follows:

Article XIII. WE AFFIRM that awareness of the literary categories, formal and stylistic, of the various parts of Scripture is essential for proper exegesis, and hence we value genre criticism as one of the many disciplines of biblical study. WE DENY that generic categories which negate the historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual.

Article XIV. WE AFFIRM that the biblical record of events, discourses and sayings, though presented in a variety of appropriate literary forms, corresponds to historical fact. WE DENY that any such event, discourse or saying reported in Scripture was invented by the biblical writers or by the traditions they incorporated.

Article XV. WE AFFIRM the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will account for all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text. WE DENY the

legitimacy of any approach to Scripture that attributes to it meaning which the literal sense does not support.

Article XVI. WE AFFIRM that legitimate critical techniques should be used in determining the canonical text and its meaning. WE DENY the legitimacy of allowing any method of biblical criticism to question the truth or integrity of the writer's expressed meaning, or of any other scriptural teaching.

Redaction versus Editing. There are important differences between destructive redaction and constructive editing. No knowledgeable scholars deny that a certain amount of editing occurred over the biblical text's thousands of years of history. This legitimate editing, however, must be distinguished from illegitimate redaction which the negative critics allege. The negative critics have failed to present any convincing evidence that the kind of redaction they believe in has ever happened to the biblical text.

The following chart contrasts the two views.

Legitimate Editing	Illegitimate Redacting
Changes in form	Changes in content
Scribal changes	Substantive changes
Changes in the text	Changes in the truth

The redaction model of the canon confuses legitimate scribal activity, involving grammatical form, updating of names, and arrangement of prophetic material, with illegitimate redactive changes in actual content of a prophet's message. It confuses acceptable scribal transmission with unacceptable tampering. It confuses proper discussion of which text is earlier with improper discussion of how later writers changed the truth of texts. There is no evidence that any significant illegitimate redactive changes have occurred since the Bible was first put in writing. On the contrary, all evidence supports a careful transmission in all substantial matters and in most details. No diminution of basic truth has occurred from the original writings to the Bibles in our hands today (*see* OLD TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS; NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS).

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Bib. Sac. Bibliotheca Sacra

¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 86-91.

REDACTION CRITICISM

Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 662-68.

Redaction criticism is a historical and literary discipline which studies both the ways the redactors/ editors/authors changed their sources and the seams or transitions they utilized to link those traditions into a unified whole. The purpose of this approach is to recover the author's theology and setting. Redaction criticism is the third of four "schools" of criticism developed in this century to study the Gospels and other biblical narratives: *Form criticism*, which seeks the original or authentic tradition behind the final form found in the Gospels but tends to assume that the Evangelists were mere scissors-and-paste editors who artificially strung together the traditions they inherited; *tradition criticism*, a stepchild of form criticism, which tries to reconstruct the history or development of the Gospel traditions from the earliest to the final form in the Gospels but often ignores the contribution of the Evangelists; and *literary criticism*, which bypasses the historical dimension and studies only the final form of the text, assuming that the value of the Gospels is to be found apart from considerations of originating event or author. Redaction criticism originally developed as a corrective to areas of neglect in form and tradition criticism, but it functions also as a corrective to excesses in literary criticism.

1. The Process of Redactional Inquiry
2. The Origins of Redaction Criticism
3. The Methodology of Redaction Criticism
4. The Weaknesses of Redaction Criticism
5. The Place and Value of Redaction Criticism

1. The Process of Redactional Inquiry.

Redaction criticism must build upon the results of source criticism, for the final results are determined in part by one's choice of Markan or Matthean priority (*see* Synoptic Problem). The most widely held hypothesis remains the Oxford, or four-document, hypothesis of B. H. Streeter, who taught that Matthew and Luke utilized two primary sources, Mark and Q, along with their own secondary sources (M and L). Redaction critics begin with this assumption and study the alterations which the Evangelists made to their sources. This means that redactional study is most relevant for Matthew and Luke, less so for Mark (we don't know what sources he may have used) or John (independent for the most part from the Synoptics; *see* Synoptics and John).

Redaction critics work also with the results of form and tradition criticism, assuming the process of tradition development but studying primarily the final stage, the changes wrought by the Evangelists themselves. When examining Luke's redaction of the crucifixion narrative (*see* Death of Jesus), these scholars ask which of the three "last sayings" peculiar to Luke (23:34, 43, 46) may have been added earlier by the community and which were added by the Evangelist. They believe that these changes to the tradition provide a clue to the Evangelist's theological intentions and the life-situation (*Sitz im Leben*) of his community.

This is accomplished by asking *why* the changes were made and by seeking consistent patterns in the alterations made by the redactor. Such modifications denote redactional interests or theological tendencies on the part of the Evangelist who introduced them. In Luke's crucifixion narrative two such tendencies might be noted: a christological stress on Jesus as the innocent righteous martyr (exemplified also in Lk 23:47, "Surely this man was righteous [*dikaios*]") and an emphasis on the crucifixion as a scene of worship (seen in the absence of negative aspects like the earthquake, in the redaction of the taunts which in Luke are contrasted with Jesus' prayer for forgiveness, and in the fact that two of the sayings are prayers).

Finally, the setting or situation of the Lukan church is reconstructed by asking what led to these changes. This is of course a speculative enterprise, but most critics believe that sociological factors hinted at in the text were behind the pastoral concerns which determined the final form. Thus redaction criticism is interested in both the theological interests and the ecclesiastical situation behind the Gospel texts.

2. The Origins of Redaction Criticism.

There were several precursors to this movement, such as W. Wrede's "messianic secret"; N. B. Stonehouse's study of christological emphases in the Synoptic Gospels; R. H. Lightfoot's Bampton lectures of 1934, which studied Mark's theological treatment of his sources; or K. L. Schmidt's form-critical treatment of the Markan seams. Like the origins of form criticism via three German scholars working independently in post-World-War-1 Germany (Schmidt, Dibelius, Bultmann), redaction criticism began in post-World-War-2 Germany with three independent works—those of Bornkamm, Conzelmann and Marxsen.

G. Bornkamm launched the movement with his 1948 article, "The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew," later combined with articles by two of his students in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*. He argued that Matthew not only changed but reinterpreted Mark's miracle story (*see* Miracles, Miracle Stories) into a paradigm of discipleship centering on the "little faith" of the disciples as a metaphor for the difficult journey of the "little ship of the church." In a 1954 article, "Matthew As Interpreter of the Words of the Lord" (expanded to "End-Expectation and Church in Matthew" and included in the volume mentioned above) Bornkamm considered Matthew's Gospel as a whole, stating that for Matthew eschatology is the basis for ecclesiology: the church defines itself and its mission in terms of the coming judgment.

N. Perrin states, "If Günther Bornkamm is the first of the true redaction critics, Hans Conzelmann is certainly the most important" (28). Conzelmann's study of Luke began with a 1952 article, "Zur Lukasanalyse," later expanded into *The Theology of St. Luke* (1954). He challenged the prevalent view by arguing that Luke was a theologian rather than a historian; the delay of the Parousia led Luke to replace the imminent eschatology of Mark with a salvation-historical perspective having three stages—the time of Israel, ending with John the Baptist; the time of Jesus (the "center of time," the original German book title); and the time of the church (*see* Luke, Gospel of). According to Conzelmann the kingdom (*see* Kingdom of God) in Luke has become virtually a timeless entity, with the Parousia no longer the focus. Mark's brief interim has become an indefinite period, and the church is prepared for prolonged conflict in the lengthy period before the final judgment.

W. Marxsen in his *Mark the Evangelist* (1956) was the first to use the term *Redaktionsgeschichte*, and the first and most influential portion of his work described the differences between form and redaction criticism, asserting that form-critical research has missed the third *Sitz im Leben* (after the situations of Jesus and the early church), namely that of the

Evangelist. His method is called “backwards exegesis,” which interprets each pericope from the perspective of those preceding it. By this theory Mark used the John the Baptist (*see* John the Baptist) story not to tell what happened but rather to provide a base for what came after, the story of Jesus. Marxsen’s actual theory regarding Mark was much less influential; he stated that Mark wrote to tell the church to flee the terrible persecution during the Jewish War of A.D. 66 and to proceed to Galilee where the imminent return of the Son of man (Parousia) would take place.

3. The Methodology of Redaction Criticism.

The difficulty in redactional research is determining with some degree of probability that a redactional nuance is present in the text. The discipline is prone to highly speculative theories because the methodology as well as the thoroughness of the search completely determines the results. Marxsen, on the one hand, makes Mark a Jewish-Christian work centering on an imminent Parousia, while Weeden, on the other hand, turns Mark into a Hellenistic work countering a “divine man” heresy (*see* Divine Man/Theios Aner) by recasting Mark’s battle with his opponents in the form of a dramatic conflict between Jesus (= Mark) and his disciples (= Mark’s opponents). Few interpreters have followed either theory because both failed to consider all the evidence. The key to redactional study is a good synopsis of the Gospels, which becomes the basis for the research. A scholar compares the Gospel accounts, compiles the differences and then studies the resultant data by means of the following stages of analysis.

3.1. Tradition-Critical Analysis. The historical development of the pericope from Jesus through the early church to the Evangelist is determined by applying the criteria of authenticity to the passage: (1) *Dissimilarity* (the tradition is authentic if it exhibits no ties to Judaism or the church); (2) *multiple attestation* (the pericope is repeated in several of the primary sources like Mark, Q, M, L or in more than one form); (3) *divergent patterns* (it is contrary to emphases in the early church); (4) *unintended evidence of historicity* (details which suggest an eyewitness report); (5) *Aramaic or Palestinian features* (Semitic constructions [*see* Languages of Palestine] or Palestinian customs which point to a early origin); and (6) *coherence* (it is consistent with other passages proven reliable on the basis of other criteria). These in and of themselves do not prove authenticity, of course, but they can demonstrate that the tradition goes back to the earliest stages and they do shift the burden of proof to the skeptic.

These criteria were originally developed under a so-called hermeneutic of suspicion which assumed that the stories were “guilty unless proven innocent,” that is, they were nonhistorical unless shown otherwise. However, it has repeatedly been shown that the criteria when used in this manner have proved inconclusive, and most today use them more positively to trace the text’s development. In this way tradition criticism provides the data for the form-critical and redaction-critical stages which follow. Nevertheless, demonstrating the text’s reliability (the positive side) is an important step in itself since it grounds the interpreters in history and forces them to realize that they are not just tracing the ideas of Mark or Matthew (a danger of redactional study) but also the very life and teachings of the historical Jesus (*see* Historical Jesus).

Tradition criticism used in this way is an important step prior to carrying out redactional study. Its primary value lies in the area of historical verification, for it links redactional study with the quest for the historical Jesus and anchors the results in history. One danger of redaction criticism is the tendency of many critics today to take an ahistorical approach—to study the Gospels as purely literary creations rather than as books which trace the life of Jesus. Tradition criticism provides a control against such tendencies. Moreover, the study of the history of the

development of the text, though admittedly speculative at times, leads to greater accuracy in identifying redactional tendencies. By tracing with greater precision how an author is using the sources and how the sources have developed, the results of redactional criticism will be established on a stronger data base.

3.2. Form-Critical Analysis. Before beginning the detailed study of a pericope it is crucial to determine the form it takes, since the interpreter will apply a different set of hermeneutical principles to each sub-genre in the Gospels. A pericope can take the form of a *pronouncement story* (the setting and details lead up to a climactic saying of Jesus); *miracle story* (some emphasizing the miracle or exorcism, others discipleship, christology, cosmic conflict or the presence of the kingdom); *dominical saying* (further classified by Bultmann as wisdom logia, prophetic or apocalyptic sayings, legal sayings or church rules, “I” sayings and similitudes); *parable* (further subdivided into similitudes, example stories, and one-, two- or three-point parables depending on the number of characters involved); *event or historical story* (episodes in Jesus’ life like the baptism or Transfiguration—often labeled “legends” because of their supernatural nature); and *passion story* (considered a separate type even though the passion narrative contains several actual “forms”; see Passion Narrative). In the final analysis the formal features help more in the stage of composition criticism than in redactional study, but these are two aspects of a larger whole and therefore form-critical analysis is an important part of the redactional process.

3.3. Redaction-Critical Analysis. The interpreter examines the pericope and notes each time the source (Mark or Q) has been changed in order to determine whether the alteration is redactional or stylistic; that is, whether it has a theological purpose or is cosmetic, part of the Evangelist’s normal style. While this process is obviously more conducive for Matthew and Luke, since sources in Mark are so difficult to detect and John is so independent, most scholars believe that a nuanced redaction criticism may still be applied to Mark and John (though without many of the source-critical techniques). The principles which follow are intended to guide the student through the process as it applies to all four Gospels. There are two stages—the individual analysis of a single pericope, and holistic analysis which studies redactional strata that appear throughout the Gospel. These aspects work together, as the data emerge from the individual studies and are evaluated on the basis of recurring themes in the whole.

3.3.1. Individual Analysis. The text of the synopsis should first be underlined with different colors to denote which readings are unique to a Gospel, which are paralleled in Mark and Matthew, Mark and Luke or Matthew and Luke (Q), and which are found in all three. The next step is to evaluate the data. S. McKnight (85–87) notes seven ways the Evangelists redact their sources: (1) They can *conserve* them (important because this also has theological significance for the Evangelist); (2) *conflate two traditions* (as in the use of both Mark and Q in the temptation story of Matthew and Luke); (3) *expand the source* (e.g., Matthew’s added material in the walking-on-the-water miracle, Mt 14:22–33; cf. Mk 6:45–52); (4) *transpose the settings* (as in the different settings for Jesus’ compassion for Jerusalem in Mt 23:37–39 and Lk 13:34–35); (5) *omit portions* of the tradition (e.g., the missing descriptions of demonic activity in the healing of the demon-possessed child, Mt 17:14–21; cf. Mk 9:14–29; see Demon, Devil, Satan); (6) *explain details* in the source (e.g., Mark’s lengthy explanation of washing the hands, Mk 7:3–4; or Matthew changing “Son of man” to “I,” 10:32; cf. Lk 12:8); or (7) *alter a tradition to avoid misunderstandings* (as when Matthew alters Mark’s “Why do you call me good?” [Mk 10:18] to “Why do you ask me about what is good?” [Mt 19:17]).

By grouping the changes the student can detect patterns which point to certain theological nuances within the larger matrix of the story as a whole. Each change is evaluated in terms of potential meaning; that is, does it possess theological significance as it affects the development of the story? For instance, Matthew changes the endings of both Mark 6:52 (“Their heart was hardened,” cf. Mt 14:33, “Surely you are the Son of God”) and 8:21 (“Don’t you understand yet?” cf. Mt 16:12, “Then they understood ...”). In both Gospels these two sets of endings conclude the group of stories centered on the feedings of the five thousand and four thousand. It is likely that the differences are due to Mark’s stress on the reality of discipleship failure and Matthew’s emphasis on the difference that the presence of Jesus makes in overcoming failure.

3.3.2. *Holistic Analysis.* The individual analysis is now expanded to note the development of themes as the narrative of the whole Gospel unfolds. Decisions regarding single accounts are somewhat preliminary until they are corroborated by the presence of similar themes elsewhere. Also, these steps enable one to discover redactional emphases in Mark and John, for which the interpreter has difficulty noting sources.

The “seams” in a Gospel are the introductions, conclusions and transitions which connect the episodes and provide important clues to the theological purpose of the author. They often contain a high proportion of the author’s own language and point to an Evangelist’s particular reasons for including the pericope. For instance, the two seams in Mark 1:21 and 3:1 provide a synagogue setting for the christological emphasis on Jesus’ authority in word and deed as he confronts the Jewish leaders. Also, the summaries in a Gospel are redactional indicators of theological overtones. An example of this would be Matthew 4:23 and 9:35 (introducing the Sermon on the Mount [*see* Sermon on the Mount] and missionary discourse, respectively), which contain similar wording and summarize Jesus’ itinerant missionary activity. The threefold emphasis on teaching, preaching and healing are major theological emphases in Matthew.

Editorial asides and insertions are key indicators of the theological direction a narrative is taking. John has long been known for his tendency to add explanatory comments to describe the significance more fully, as in his famous commentary (3:16–21) on the soteriological significance of the Nicodemus dialog (3:1–15). In similar fashion, repeated or favorite terms show particular interests. Again, John is the master of this technique; nearly every theological stress is highlighted by terms which appear nearly as often in his Gospel as in the rest of the NT together (e.g., *alētheia* [85 of the 163 NT uses; *see* Truth], *zōē* [66 of the 135 NT uses; *see* Life], or *kosmos* [105 of the 185 NT uses; *see* World]) and by word groups of synonymous terms (e.g., the two terms for “know,” two for “love” or five for “see”).

Finally, theme studies (McKnight calls this “motif analysis”) trace the development of theological emphases within the Gospel as a whole. Here one reads through the Gospel, noting the theological threads which are woven together into the fabric of the whole. For instance, one of Mark’s primary themes is discipleship failure, introduced in Mk 4:38, 40 and then emerging as a major emphasis in the “hardened heart” passages of Mk 6:52 and 8:17 (*see* Hardness of Heart). The passion predictions are contrasted with the disciples’ failure (Mk 8:31–33; 9:31–34; 10:32–40). Chapter 14 contains several scenes of failure (Mk 14:4–5, 10–11, 17–20, 27–31, 37–40, 50–51, 66–72), and the Gospel ends on a note of discipleship failure (Mk 16:8).

Mark is a special test case for holistic analysis and for redaction criticism as a whole. If one accepts the prevalent theory of Markan priority, then there are no obvious sources (Matthew and Luke have Mark and Q) with which to compare Mark in order to determine redactional peculiarities. The traditions behind Mark are very difficult to detect, and no scholarly consensus has yet emerged as to their identity. As a result there is a bewildering array of theories regarding

the redactional nature of the Second Gospel. In order to overcome these problems, R. Stein (positive regarding the possibilities) and M. Black (skeptical about the possibilities) have proposed several criteria for redactional research: (1) Study the seams, insertions and summaries; (2) determine whether Mark has created (a controversial criterion) or modified traditional material; (3) note Mark's process of selecting and arranging material; (4) ask whether Mark has omitted material (also controversial because the question always arises whether Mark has omitted an emphasis or been unaware of it, e.g., the famous Matthean addendum to the divorce passage, "except for adultery"); (5) study Mark's introduction and conclusion; and (6) elucidate Mark's vocabulary, style and christological titles. When all these tools are used together, the Gospels of Mark or John open themselves to redactional study.

3.4. Composition-Critical Analysis. The task is incomplete so long as one focuses only on the redactional changes, so most recent redaction critics wish to study the traditions included as well as the redactional modifications. Obviously, each Evangelist unified tradition and redaction into a larger whole in producing a Gospel. It is erroneous to examine only the redaction.

3.4.1. The Structure. The way the Evangelist arranges material tells a great deal about the meaning of the whole. At both the micro and macro levels the rearrangement of the inherited tradition is significant. In the temptation narrative Matthew and Luke reverse the last two temptations (*see* Temptation of Jesus). Most believe that Matthew contains the original order and that Luke concludes with the Temple temptation due to his special interest in Jerusalem and the Temple (Lk 4:9–12). But it is also possible that Matthew concludes with a mountain scene for thematic reasons (Mt 4:8–10; cf. 5:1; 8:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1). At the macro level, one could note the quite different things which Mark and Luke do with Jesus' early Capernaum-based ministry, with Mark placing the call to the disciples first, due to his discipleship emphasis (Mk 1:16–20), and reserving the rejection at Nazareth for later (Mk 6:1–6), while Luke begins with Jesus' inaugural address and rejection at Nazareth (Lk 4:16–30) in order to center upon christology, reserving the call of the disciples for later (Lk 5:1–11).

3.4.2. Intertextual Development. Each Evangelist arranges pericopes in such a way that their interaction with one another yields the intended message. Intertextuality at the macro level is the literary counterpart to redaction criticism at the micro level, for the Evangelist uses the same techniques of selection, omission and structure in both. This is exemplified in Mark's strategic placing of the two-stage healing of the blind man in Mark 8:22–26 (found only in Mark). On one level it forms an inclusion with the healing of the deaf man in Mark 7:31–37, stressing the need for healing on the part of the disciples (note the failure of Mk 8:14–21, in which the disciples are accused of being both blind and deaf!; *see* Blindness and Deafness). On another level it metaphorically anticipates the two-stage surmounting of the disciples' misunderstanding via Peter's confession (Mk 8:27–33, only a partial understanding) and the Transfiguration (Mk 9:1–10, at which time they glimpse the true nature of Jesus, cf. esp. Mk 9:9).

3.4.3. Plot. Plot refers to the interconnected sequence of events which follows a cause-effect pattern and centers upon conflict. The student examines how the characters interact and how the lines of causality develop to a climax. For redaction criticism this means especially the individual emphases of the Evangelists. The differences are often striking, as in the resurrection narratives. Mark follows a linear pattern, tracing the failure of the disciples and concluding with the women's inability to witness (Mk 16:8). This is countered by the enigmatic promise of Jesus to meet them in Galilee (Mk 16:7; cf. 14:28), apparently the place of reinstatement (note Mk 14:28 following 14:27). Matthew constructs a double-edged conflict in which the supernatural intervention of God (Mt 28:2–4) and the universal authority of Jesus (Mt 28:18–20) overcome

the twofold attempt of the priests (*see* Priest, Priesthood) to thwart the divine plan (Mt 27:62–66; 28:11–15).

3.4.4. *Setting and Style.* When the Evangelists place a saying or event in different settings, they often produce a new theological thrust. For instance, Matthew places the parable of the lost sheep (Mt 18:12–14) in the context of the disciples and the church, with the result that it refers to straying members, while in Luke 15:3–7 Jesus addresses the same parable to the Pharisees and scribes, so that it refers to those outside the kingdom.

Style refers to the individual way that a saying or story is phrased and arranged so as to produce the effect that the author wishes. There can be gaps, chiasm, repetition, omissions and highly paraphrased renditions in order to highlight some nuance which Jesus gave his teaching but which is of particular interest to the Evangelist. Here it is important to remember that the Evangelists' concern was not the *ipsissima verba* (exact words) but the *ipsissima vox* (the very voice) of Jesus. They were free to give highly paraphrastic renditions to stress one certain aspect. One example is the Matthean and Lukan forms of the Beatitudes, which most scholars take to be derived from the same occasion (Luke's "plain" can also mean a mountain plateau in Greek). In Matthew the central stress is on ethical qualities ("blessed are the poor in spirit," Mt 5:3), while in Luke the emphasis is on economic deprivation ("blessed are you poor," Mt 5:20; cf. "woe to you rich," Mt 5:24). Both were undoubtedly intended by Jesus, while the two Evangelists highlighted different aspects.

4. The Weaknesses of Redaction Criticism.

Many have discounted the value of redaction criticism due to the excesses of some of its practitioners. Primarily, it has been the application of redaction criticism along with historical skepticism that has led some to reject the approach. As a result of the influence of form and tradition criticism in the past and of narrative criticism in the present, the historical reliability of Gospel stories has been called into question (*see* Gospels [Historical Reliability]). Certainly some critics have begun with the premise that redaction entails the creation of Gospel material which is unhistorical, but this is by no means a necessary conclusion.

Techniques like omission, expansion or rearrangement are attributes of style and are not criteria for historicity. Another problem is redaction criticism's dependence on the four-document hypothesis. It is true that the results would look quite different if one were to assume the Griesbach hypothesis (the priority of Matthew). However, one must make a conclusion of some sort regarding the interrelationship of the Gospels before redactional study can begin, and most scholars have judged the four-document hypothesis to be clearly superior to the others (*see* Synoptic Problem).

As in form criticism, redactional studies tend to fragment the pericopes when they study only the additions to the traditions. Theology is to be found in the combined tradition and redaction—not in the redaction alone. The movement to *composition criticism* has provided a healthy corrective. The Evangelists' alterations are the major source of evidence, but the theology comes from the whole. Similarly, there has been a problem with overstatement. Scholars have often seen significance in every "jot and tittle" and have forgotten that many changes are stylistic rather than theological. Once again, composition criticism helps avoid excesses by looking for patterns rather than seeing theology in every possible instance.

Subjectivism is another major danger. Studies utilizing the same data frequently produce different results, and thus some argue that no assured results can ever come from redaction-critical studies. The only solution is a judicious use of *all* the hermeneutical tools along with

cross-pollination between the studies. Interaction between theories can demonstrate where the weaknesses are in each. Subjectivism is especially seen in speculations regarding *Sitz im Leben*, which are too often based on the assumption that every theological point is addressed to some problem in the community behind the Gospel. This ignores the fact that many of the emphases are due to christological, liturgical, historical or evangelistic interests. The proper life-situation study is not so much concerned with the detailed reconstruction of the church behind a Gospel as in the delineation of the Evangelists' message to that church.

5. The Place and Value of Redaction Criticism.

A careful use of proper methodology can reduce the problems inherent in redaction criticism, and the values far outweigh the dangers. In fact, any study of the Gospels will be enhanced by redaction-critical techniques. A true understanding of the doctrine of inspiration demands it, for each Evangelist was led by God to utilize sources in the production of a Gospel. Moreover, they were given the freedom by God to omit, expand and highlight these traditions in order to bring out individual nuances peculiar to their own Gospel. Nothing else can explain the differing messages of the same stories as told in the various Gospels. There is no necessity to theorize wholesale creation of stories, nor to assert that these nuances were not in keeping with the original Gospels. Here a judicious harmonizing approach like that espoused by C. Blomberg is valuable. In short, redaction criticism has enabled us to rediscover the Evangelists as inspired authors and to understand their books for the first time as truly Gospels; not just biographical accounts but history with a message. They did not merely chronicle events but interpreted them and produced historical sermons.

Until redaction criticism arose, Christians tended to turn to the epistles for theology. Now we know that the Gospels are not only theological but in some ways communicate a theology even more relevant than the epistles, because these truths are presented not through didactic literature but by means of the living relationships reflected in narrative. The Gospels are "case-study" workbooks for theological truth, yielding not just theology taught but theology lived and modelled. Redactional study enables us to reconstruct with some precision the theology of each of the Evangelists by noting how they utilized their sources and then by discovering patterns in the changes which exemplify themes developed through the Gospels. The whole (tradition, redaction and compositional development) interact together to produce the inspired message of each Evangelist.

In this way the reader understands the twofold purpose of the Gospels: to present the life and teachings of the historical Jesus (the historical component) in such a way as to address the church and the world (the kerygmatic component). History and theology are valid aspects of Gospel analysis, and we dare not neglect either without destroying the God-ordained purpose of the Gospels. While redaction criticism as a discipline centers on the theological aspect, it does not ignore the historical nature of the Gospels. Finally, redaction criticism is a preaching and not just an academic tool. The Gospels were originally contextualizations of the life and teaching of Jesus for the reading and listening audiences of the Evangelists' time. They were biographical sermons (one aspect of the meaning of the term "Gospel") applying Jesus' impact on his disciples, the crowds (*see* People, Crowd) and the Jewish leaders to first-century readers and listeners. This is perhaps the best use of life-situation approaches, for they show how Matthew or Luke addressed problems in their communities and demonstrate how they can address similar problems in our churches.

See also FORM CRITICISM; GOSPELS (GENRE); GOSPELS (HISTORICAL RELIABILITY); JOHN, GOSPEL OF; LITERARY CRITICISM; LUKE, GOSPEL OF; MARK, GOSPEL OF; MATTHEW, GOSPEL OF; SYNOPTIC PROBLEM; TRADITION CRITICISM.

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JSOT *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*

PRS Perspectives in Religious Studies

GNTE Guides to New Testament Exegesis

JETS Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

SNTSMS Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

NovT Novum Testamentum

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² *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 662–68.

