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Source Criticism of the Gospels and Acts

Presuppositions of Source Criticism

- A significant period of time (thirty to sixty years) elapsed between the occurrence of the events reported in the Gospels and Acts and the writing of these books.
- Although this period was primarily a time of oral transmission, some materials probably were put into writing before the Gospels and Acts were produced.
- Some of these materials probably were collected and circulated or preserved by communities, including those in which the Gospels and Acts were later produced.
- These early written materials were edited by the evangelists, who used them as sources when they composed the Gospels and Acts.

What Source Critics Do

Source critics identify places in the Gospels and Acts where an evangelist may be drawing on material that was already in writing. They do this through external and internal analysis.

External Analysis

The clearest identifications of source material usually come through the study of parallel passages. When the same material is found in

more than one writing, scholars may decide that one of these writings was the source for the other(s) or that some other document was the common source for all the parallel passages known to us.

Internal Analysis

Editorial seams such as abrupt shifts or awkward connections may indicate a transition to source material. Peculiarities of style or content are also indications that source material is being used. Based on such analysis, source critics propose lists of materials that each author might have used when composing his book.

Results of Source Criticism: Some Common Proposals

Possible Sources for Matthew's Gospel

- the Gospel of Mark
- a collection of the sayings of Jesus, called "Q"
- a variety of other sources, collectively called "M"

According to the Farrer Theory, Matthew used Mark as a source, but not Q; according to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, Matthew did not use Mark or Q.

Possible Sources for Mark's Gospel

- a collection of controversy stories, including those found now in Mark 2:1–3:6
- a collection or, possibly, two collections of miracle stories, including many of those now found in chapters 4–8

- an apocalyptic tract containing much of what is now in chapter 13
- an early version of the passion narrative (the story of Jesus's death and resurrection)

According to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, Mark used Matthew and Luke as sources.

Possible Sources for Luke's Gospel

- the Gospel of Mark
- a collection of the sayings of Jesus, called "Q"
- a variety of other sources, collectively called "L"

According to the Farrer Theory, Luke used Mark and Matthew as a source, but not Q; according to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, Luke used Matthew as a source, but not Mark or Q.

Possible Sources for John's Gospel

- a "Signs Gospel" that recorded seven or eight miracle stories (John 2:1–12; 4:46–54; 5:1–9; 6:1–13; 9:1–7; 11:1–44; 21:1–6; perhaps 6:15–25) and may have included an account of the passion and resurrection
- a collection of remembrances of one called the "beloved disciple," dealing mostly with the last week of Jesus's life
- a body of material underlying the great discourses of Jesus, possibly sermons by the beloved disciple or another prominent member of the community

Possible Sources for the Book of Acts

- an Aramaic document describing the life of the early church in Jerusalem, used for Acts 1–12
- a collection of traditions from the church in Antioch, used for stories concerning Stephen and Barnabas (6:1–8:3; 11:19–30; 12:25–25:35)
- a travel diary, used for portions of the book recounting the journeys of Paul

Separating Tradition from Framework

Source critics sometimes attempt to reconstruct what the early written sources may have looked like prior to their incorporation into the Gospels or Acts. In doing this, they distinguish between *tradition* (the source material originally available to the author) and *framework* (the material added to the source when it was incorporated into the book of which it is now a part).

This works best when the sources have been identified through external analysis.

For material in Matthew or Luke that has a parallel in Mark, the Markan parallel is usually thought to represent the source for what is in Matthew or Luke. Accordingly, the material in Matthew or Luke that is identical with what is in the Markan parallel may be designated “tradition,” and the material that differs from what is in the Markan parallel may be designated “framework.”

For material that is parallel in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, the source is thought to have been “Q,” which is now lost to us. When the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke are identical, this material may be designated “tradition.” When the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke differ, one of the two readings can perhaps be designated “tradition” and the other “framework,” but a judgment must be made as to which reading most likely represents the original source.

Designation of tradition and framework is less certain with regard to sources identified through internal analysis. Sometimes, however, source critics will designate as “tradition” the material that is more consistent linguistically, thematically, or theologically with other material ascribed to the source than with the document as a whole.

Why Source Critics Do This

Scholars who are interested in the historical period of Jesus and his earliest followers believe that even tentative reconstructions of early written sources are more likely to be representative of this period than the edited material in the Gospels and Acts.

Scholars who are interested in the history of the early church believe the reconstructed sources offer direct testimony to the concerns of the church during the period before the Gospels and Acts were written.

Scholars who are interested in the concerns of the evangelists believe that the identification and possible reconstruction of sources allows them to discern better the distinctive interests of the evangelists evident in their editing of these sources.

Bibliography of Classic Works

Overview

Kümmel, Werner Georg. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Rev. ed. Nashville: Abingdon, 1975. A basic survey with information on sources for all four Gospels and Acts.

On Sources for Matthew and Luke

Farmer, William. *The Synoptic Problem. A Critical Analysis*. Rev. ed. Dillsboro: Western North Carolina Press, 1976. A history of the discussion by someone who does not accept the dominant view. Concludes with a critique of B. H. Streeter (see below) and support for what is now called the Two-Gospel Hypothesis (the view that Luke used Matthew, while Mark used both Matthew and Luke).

Goodacre, Mark. *The Case against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002. Offers support for what is called the “Farrer Theory”: Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, but not Q; instead, Luke used Matthew as a source, explaining the overlap between Matthew and Luke sometimes ascribed to Q.

Streeter, B. H. *The Four Gospels: A Study of the Origins, Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, and Dates*.

London: Macmillan, 1924. Contains the original statement of what has been revised and developed to become the dominant view: Matthew used Mark, Q, and M, while Luke used Mark, Q, and L.

On Sources for Mark

Achtemeier, Paul J. "Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle

Catenae." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 265–91; "The Origin and Function of the Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae."

Journal of Biblical Literature 91 (1972): 198–221. Definitive statement of the view that Mark used a collection of miracle stories as one source in composing his Gospel.

Matera, Frank J. *What Are They Saying about Mark?* New York:

Paulist Press, 1987. Chapter 4 contains summaries of the important theories of Rudolf Pesch and Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn, whose works are not available in English.

On Sources for John

Bultmann, Rudolf. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Philadelphia:

Westminster, 1971. A classic interpretation that assumes three sources: a "signs source," a "discourse source," and a "passion narrative."

Fortna, R. T. *The Gospel of Signs*. SNTSMS 11. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1970. Contends that the "signs

source” that Rudolf Bultmann (see above) identified was actually an early Gospel in its own right. See also Fortna’s *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.

Kysar, Robert. “The Evangelist and His Tradition.” In *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship*, 9–82. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975. A survey of the most important works on this subject.

Lindars, Barnabas. *Behind the Fourth Gospel*. London: SPCK, 1971. Presents a developmental model through which the Gospel was produced in stages. Compare the view of Raymond Brown in *The Gospel According to John*. 2nd ed. AB 29, 29A. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979.

On Sources for Acts

Dibelius, Martin. *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*. Edited by Heinrich Greeven. Translated by Mary Ling. 1941. Reprint, New York: Scribner, 1956. Proposes that Luke used a travel diary as a source for Acts.

von Harnack, Adolf. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Translated by J. R. Wilkinson. London: Williams & Norgate, 1909. The original proposal that Luke used various “local sources” (including Antioch traditions) in composing Acts.

Wilcox, Max. *The Semitisms of Acts*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1965. Argues that Luke had Aramaic sources for Acts but has

integrated them into the document so well that they cannot be reconstructed.