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Redaction Criticism of the Gospels

The goal of redaction criticism is to uncover the particular theologies of the individual evangelists by analyzing the manner in which they “redacted” (or edited) their Gospels.

Presuppositions of Redaction Criticism

- The Gospel authors were not eyewitnesses for much that they report; they had to rely on oral and written reports passed on to them by others.
- The Gospel authors did have such sources: some written materials regarding words and deeds of Jesus and his followers and many accounts that had come to them through oral tradition.
- The Gospel authors were not just “scissors and paste” collectors interested in preserving these source materials; they wanted to tell coherent stories that would be rhetorically effective, and they had to edit the source materials to make them fit into their narratives.
- The Gospel authors were not disinterested reporters but “evangelists” with distinctive theological commitments and ideals; they edited their source materials accordingly.

What Redaction Critics Do

Redaction critics analyze the Gospel narratives to detect editorial tendencies. This analysis is of two basic types.

Emendation Analysis

This type of analysis attempts to discern an author's distinctive interests by observing changes that have been made in the source material. This procedure presupposes possession of the source material so that comparisons between the Gospel and its source can be made.

Emendation analysis works best in study of those portions of Matthew and Luke that are thought to be derived from Mark, because the text from Matthew or Luke can be compared side by side with that of Mark, and the changes that either Matthew or Luke made can be clearly seen. Examples include:

- In Mark 4:40, Jesus says to his disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still *no faith?*"
- In Matthew 8:26, he says, "Why are you afraid, you of *little faith?*"

The dominant theory is that Matthew had a copy of Mark's Gospel and changed the words "no faith" to "little faith." This affects how Matthew's readers perceived Jesus's disciples, and it may reveal something about Matthew's understanding of discipleship.

Emendation analysis is less helpful in the study of Matthew/Luke parallels where the apparent source was not Mark's Gospel but, possibly, a now lost document that scholars call "Q." Examples include:

- In Luke 6:20, Jesus says, “Blessed are *you who are poor*.”
- In Matthew 5:3, he says, “Blessed are *the poor in spirit*.”

The dominant theory is that the source used by Matthew and Luke (Q) said either “you who are poor” or “the poor in spirit,” and one of the two Gospels (Matthew or Luke) changed it; however, it is difficult to know which one made the change.

Emendation analysis seems to be least helpful in the study of Mark, John, or passages unique to Matthew (“M” material) or Luke (“L” material). Even then, however, the distinction between “tradition” and “framework” material made by source and form critics allows for some application of the method.

Composition Analysis

This type of analysis attempts to discern an author’s distinctive interests by noting how individual units have been ordered and arranged in the work as a whole.

First, composition analysis includes general observations regarding the overall structure of a Gospel. Example:

- The Gospel of Luke devotes ten chapters (9:51–19:40) to describing a journey that Jesus makes to Jerusalem, a trip that appears to be covered in about half a chapter elsewhere (Mark 10:32–52). This affects the plot of Luke’s overall story and reveals something distinctive about Luke’s perspective.

Second, composition analysis is used to examine the immediate contexts of individual passages in the Gospels. Example:

- In Matthew 18:15–20, Jesus outlines procedures for removing an unrepentant sinner from the church. In the immediately preceding passage (18:10–14), Jesus relates the parable of the lost sheep, in which he concludes, “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (18:14). And in the very next passage, Matthew presents an episode in which Jesus insists that his followers should forgive each other repeatedly (18:21–22). Thus Matthew has deliberately chosen to sandwich the harsh words dealing with possible expulsion between stories that emphasize forgiveness and mercy. This affects how Matthew’s reader hears the harsh words, and it reveals something about Matthew’s own theological priorities.

Pioneer Works in Redaction Criticism

New Testament redaction criticism began in Europe in the 1950s. It took a few years for works to be translated and produced in English, but the most important volumes for defining the discipline were these three studies of the Synoptic Gospels:

Bornkamm, Günther, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held.

Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew. Translated by Percy Scott. NTL. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963.

Conzelmann, Hans. *The Theology of Saint Luke*. Philadelphia:

Fortress, 1961.

Marxsen, Willi. *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction*

History of the Gospel. Nashville: Abingdon, 1969.