

BIB203 NT1 Life of Christ

Unit 1b The Synoptic Problem and Form Criticism

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So in this particular segment, we're going to deal with the synoptic problem. We're going to start talking about it and we're going to focus in on what is called form criticism. So, we want to start with the basics, and that is that the gospels are the first four books of the New Testament attributed to four different authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, in that particular order in our English Bibles as well as our Greek New Testament. But in point of fact, these gospels are not composed until the church is well on its way to being a viable force, a present force, a present community in the Greco-Roman era in the 1st century. Matthew is probably composed in the mid-60s, as is Luke. And of course, Luke is a two-volume work, but this is not a course on Acts. So Luke wrote a two-volume work and scholars normally call that Luke-Acts.

And then you have Mark. Mark was composed in the mid- to the late 50s, and John was composed anywhere, scholars estimate, from 85 to 95. In my informed opinion, I would tend towards the 95 date. So John in particular, the fourth gospel, is composed and therefore dated to 95, 96, some would say, six decades after the crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. So even though these gospels are the first four books of our New Testament, English or Greek, they are not the first books composed comprising the New Testament. As a quick tangent, incidentally, the first book that is composed, I should say the first letter, is that of James, which was composed in the 40s. Just to give you a bit of perspective on how that works. So even though the gospels have pride of place, the first four documents of the New Testament, they are not the first items that are composed.

So it is argued by most scholars that the gospels were not strictly biographical accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. They were primarily theological in outlook. They are, present tense, theological in outlook. You're dealing with theological history. And that opens up another way of looking at these gospels, not just as straight historical narratives but as theological narratives. The historical dimension is not destroyed, but it is not the only thing that we are looking at when we read the gospels. Some would likely take the gospels to be primarily theological and they would seek to do away with the historical dimension. That is an overreaction. There needs to be a balance. There needs to be a tension between theology and history when it comes to the gospels. It's better to classify them as ancient biographies because that is the literary form of the Greco-Roman era that they conform most closely to. So ancient biographies that exhibit some of the characteristics of the ancient Greco-Roman form, but they are not strictly Greco-Roman form. They are unique, which is why we call them theological history.

The term gospel, from the Greek word euangelion, comes from the Old English godspell, which rendered the term euangelion which means good news basically. There is no exact equivalent to this term in the Old Testament, but there is a term that comes close to the notion of gospel, and that would be the Hebrew word basar. And that's used in Isaiah 40:9. It's used in 52:7. It's used in 61:1. Jesus' use of the term with respect to Isaiah 61:1, which you see in the gospel of Luke in the synagogue, must be seen as a reconstruction of the events by Luke sometime in the mid to late 60s. It is not certain that the term basar would have been used in any sense by Jesus or if he would have used an Aramaic equivalent. But then again, because Jesus spoke Aramaic, one might say yes, he may have used that term basar just as a quick preview, a quick burst.

When you think about the gospels, the atmosphere of the gospels, particularly Luke 4:17-18 with Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, he is not reading his Isaiah text in Greek certainly. He is reading it in Hebrew, but then he is going to expound on it briefly in that pericope in Aramaic. And so that's something that is often not accounted for in our readings of the gospels. This, of course, is not me telling

you that you have to run and go learn Aramaic or Hebrew. It's just simply to raise the point that there is a layer that we often do not pay attention to as native English speakers.

So much for the term gospel, euangelion. The word is used first in the Pauline letters in the New Testament, but it did not originate with Paul. It originated with Jesus, arguably, but it's used by Paul in such a way that Mark co-opted it because Mark accompanies Paul in his first missionary journey. So it basically becomes the key expression of God's final saving act. It reflects the most advanced usage of the term gospel, euangelion, when you're thinking about Paul evangelizing Gentiles.

So this segment, as I said, is on form criticism. Everything I've said so far is introductory. And yes, we will get to form criticism in this segment. Never fear. So let's do that now. The most attenuated feature of the gospels is the literary interdependence of three of those four documents, three of those four gospels. And that would be Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Scholars, when they study the gospels, tend to study those three (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) together, and John is treated as a separate document. It is often not interpolated with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three documents exhibit similarities that cannot be denied. They demonstrate differences that cannot be ignored. And so that makes the problem for gospel students, gospel scholars interesting.

The normal designation of the three documents in question is the synoptic gospels. It comes from the term sunopsis, which is Anglicized into synopsis, which means to see together. It's a Greek term. It means to see together. And so Matthew, Mark, and Luke show undeniable similarities and yet they have differences, but they match one another in important ways. And so they see together, and so they are studied together. The ministry and movements of Jesus in the synoptic tradition differ from the portrait that is painted in the fourth gospel, which is why the fourth gospel, the gospel of John, is held separately and treated separately. As a side note, the fourth gospel is often not seen in light of its historical features so much as it is seen in terms of its theological features. There is history in the gospel of John, but mainstream study of the gospel of John tends to obscure the historical dimension.

Well, Jesus' ministry in the Galilean region is highlighted in the synoptic gospels. Then he moves north and then he comes back to the Judean and Perea regions, traveling south towards Jerusalem for the final days of his earthly ministry. That's the trajectory that you see generally in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So this term gospel, euangelion, that we just previously discussed, is used first by Mark. And we say this because the current consensus based on study in the 18th and 19th centuries is that Mark is the first gospel. And as we've said before, Mark is dependent on Paul because Mark travels out with Paul and Barnabas, as depicted in the Book of Acts on the first missionary journey. The record of the New Testament shows that Paul and Mark maintain contact after the breach in relationship between Paul and Barnabas, his missionary partner. And you can see this in Colossians 4:10 and finally even verse 24. You can see that he still has some sort of relationship with Mark. So Mark is present.

Mark engages this term gospel in the gospel that bears his name, in Mark 1:1, Mark 1:14, Mark 8:35, 10:29, 13:10, 14:9. And he engages the word, it seems, based on studies by mainstream gospel scholars. He does this to tie the oral tradition that was in circulation after the ministry of Christ came to an end here on earth. These traditions were threatening, some believe, to become detached from the message of the cross. More likely what happened was someone got the idea and then a few other people got the idea that we should probably put these oral traditions, which were highly structured, by the way, into writing. So Mark did not just assert the basic saving act. He created a passion narrative. But we're going to look at the historical background as to how Mark composes the gospel that bears his name.

So there is substantial agreement on the order of the passages in the synoptics. Verbal agreement, word agreement generally. It's clear that the arrangement of the narratives by Matthew, Mark, and Luke is not strictly chronological. It's not strictly historical. So that is what raises the question of interdependence. How do these gospels work together? That's the most basic question when you're dealing with the synoptic problem. The question of interdependence among these gospels is known as the synoptic problem. So what is that synoptic problem? We begin to answer this by dealing with three questions right off the bat. Number one: How did the synoptic gospels arise? In other words, how were they composed? Number two: What genre of literature should they be classified as? What type of literature? What is their literary type? And third, what do the gospels tell us about Christ?

Let's deal with the first question. How did the synoptic gospels arise? Well, transmission of the tradition assumes importance, first and foremost, because you're dealing with oral tradition as the earliest stage of transmission. The Jesus story is conveyed orally early on. For example, Day of Pentecost. Three thousand people get saved. Why? Because Peter gets up after having been filled by the Holy Spirit and he preaches the gospel. He preaches the message that has been poured into him for the past three and one-half years. And he declares that orally. Nothing is written at this point. When 3000 people turn to Christ, what do they do next? They move from house to house. They break bread. They submit to the teaching of the apostles. They gather at the temple. They worship God. And they begin to grow and they begin to live together. They hold all things in common. This is the oral stage, so we have to start there. And so over time, the story would have been embedded in written sources. And according to the thinking of many in the mainstream flow of things, the evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke would have used those written sources to put their gospels together, to write the story of Jesus.

So there were three approaches that developed beginning in the early 19th century: form criticism, source criticism, and redaction criticism. When you put all of those together, it is known as traditions criticism or simply tradition criticism. The first of these, form criticism, postulates a few things. Number one: The earliest traditions about Jesus began as small, self-contained narrative components. So basic small vignettes, stories that were highly structured, that were monitored by the community, if you will, so that they attained a highly developed structure. Now, most form critics do not believe that. Most form critics simply believe that these stories simply arose and that they were quite changeable, that they were quite fluid. They weren't solid. More recent research has demonstrated that from the earliest, even during Jesus' earthly ministry, the teaching that the apostles received, that the disciples received, was highly structured, geared towards their capacity to memorize because you're dealing with an aural culture. So they listen. They learn. They're not so visual. They don't have TVs. They don't have cellphones. They're not distracted by the visual component of their brains. So they have to listen. And teaching is highly structured in the synagogue. And those cadences and those techniques and those structures would be deployed by Jesus in his earthly ministry. And so the apostles would indeed remember, to a significant degree, what was taught them.

So that's one. Small, self-contained narrative components. The transmission of this material was normative. So people transmit orally in other religious traditions. It's the same for the oral tradition underlying the gospels. Number three: This material took on, over time, discernible permanent forms that can be identified in the gospels. That's the third point. I want to go back and I want to stress again that more recent research doesn't allow for development. It doesn't see the development because a consideration of Judaism in the 1st century, in the second temple period gives us quite a bit of evidence that that teaching would have been structured at the outset. So there was no need for development, as

it were, so that oral tradition would gradually take on permanent forms. There was no developmental stage as such.

Fourth point. The form of an independent unit can divulge information about its original setting in its place and usage in the early church. This is form criticism. These are the questions that they deal with. And five. The earliest forms were modified by the early Christian church as was deemed necessary. So there is the idea by form critics that the church modified these stories and shaped them so that it would fit a certain type of narrative that was amenable to the early church. Again, if these forms are highly structured at the beginning, then those arguments do not fit together. It doesn't work. Six. Form criticism has to use criteria to determine the truth of the elements of the tradition. Those criteria must take the normal laws of transmission into account.

So I will continue this in the next segment and then flow into source criticism. So what this means, continuing the discussion from the previous clip, is that the deployment of form criticism, the technique, the methodology of form criticism by form critics in gospel analysis was usually conjoined with a great deal of skepticism. In other words, they didn't believe that 1st century Jews could put the tradition into written form at the earliest stages. They did not believe that 1st century Jews could memorize material and retain a high degree of recall, which would then be buttressed and substantiated and corrected by the community where necessary so that there were no deviations. Form critics did not believe that. Form critics generally did not have a high view of Scripture, so they didn't believe that you could precisely transmit the record in oral form and they didn't believe that it could be accurately transmitted into written form. Form critics did not think much of the capacities of 1st century Jews, in sum.

So I want to go back over to these six criteria again very quickly. The first one. The earliest traditions about Jesus began as small, self-contained narrative components. Everyone can kind of agree on that. That's not a problem as such. It's when you start going down the list that you start to see cracks in the consensus appear. The second point, the second criteria. The transmission of this material was normative. This was just like in other religious traditions. Well, that's an issue. Not every religious tradition was the same. Not every religious tradition had a high degree of structure. Structure varied and does vary across religious traditions. Oral traditions in other cultures generally do not always conform to the highest standards. They differ depending on who you're dealing with, depending on what culture you're dealing with.

The third criterion. This material took on discernible, permanent forms that can be identified in the gospels. I said that already in the last clip basically. The notion of development of these forms, of these narrative units. In other words, there was some embellishment along the way. That's the implication of the methodology of form criticism. Fourth criterion. The form of an independent unit could divulge information about its original setting with respect to its place and usage in the early church. In other words, there is an assumption there that the early church sort of left its stamp on these narrative units. So a form critic, to illustrate, will take one of these units, say Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee and seeing Simon and Andrew and then seeing James and John, calling them and saying, "Follow me. I'll make you fishers and men." The form critic would be looking for the life setting of that particular pericope, that particular paragraph, that particular narrative unit. They would be looking for information about the early church. They would be looking at the language, scrutinizing it, and trying to determine what the background for that pericope was. That's the task of a form critic.

The fifth criterion. The earliest forms were modified by the early Christian church as was deemed necessary. So criterion four and criterion five sort of go together. There is the assumption that some form of modification took place. In other words, the story changed. The shaping of the story changed. The structure, the content of the story changed to fit the agenda, the needs of the early church. Number six. Form criticism has to use criteria to determine whether the tradition is true or not. So there's an implicit assumption at least that these narrative units contain little or no truth value. That's the methodology of form criticism going in. Those criteria must take the normal laws of transmission into account. But normal laws of transmission, well, that means that there's the assumption that oral transmission is the same across the board, across all cultures, across all religious traditions across the globe. And that is an assumption that has been proven, in particular by the Swedish School of Form Criticism of all things, to be untrue.

So in sum, the employment of form criticism in gospel analysis, a good deal of skepticism deployed. A good deal of skepticism as an attitude. First century Jews can't really preserve oral tradition or written tradition. And of course, the early church took that tradition and added its own impetus to the development of those traditions. So you're starting off with an assumption of no truth value and you're trying to get to what you think as a form critic is true about these narrative units and about the gospels as a whole.