

# **BIB203 NT1 Life of Christ**

## Unit 1c The Synoptic Problem and Source Criticism

Presented by the



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So in this clip, we're going to be dealing with source criticism which is basically the second approach. And we are dealing with the question: What genre of literature should they be classified under? Now, we've answered that question already. The short answer is they conform to the ancient Greco-Roman biographical form. The Greek term for that form is *eios*, if you want to write it in English. In other words, it depicts the life of an individual. The ancient Greco-Roman form did not depict everything about that person's life. It tended to depict the important features of that life. And so that's kind of what you see here with Jesus. So that's where the similarities end because the gospels, as I've said, are in a different category of their own within the larger category of the Greco-Roman biographical form. So what genre of literature? This is theological biography or theological history. You can use those terms interchangeably, depending on your preference.

So the second approach that we're looking at now is source criticism, and this approach holds that the earliest written records were collected (the technical term is *collated*), organized with oral tradition. And the result of that, there was the production of longer material. So the question that source critics using source critical methodology, the question they seek to answer concerns the nature of the written sources that the gospel writers used when they composed their gospels. So source critics look at similarity of wording. They look at equivalent shifts in style, in pericopes that are comparable, that are pretty much the same, parallel passages. Those kinds of things tend to provoke questions as to what that material is really like. What are its characteristics? Source critics also look at where the material differs. Why are there similarities and divergences in the texts? These are the main questions for the source critic.

So a good example would be Jesus' teaching on divorce in the gospel of Mark. So in the gospel of Mark, the teaching about divorce is no divorce whatsoever. There is no exception clause in the gospel of Mark. In the gospel of Matthew, the religious leaders come to Jesus and they ask him, "Is it lawful to divorce a wife for every cause?" Same passage. It's parallel passage. But when this dialogue takes place in Matthew, the way Matthew records it, when Jesus declares his final answer to the religious leaders, he says, "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of sexual immorality." So that's what scholars call the exception clause. "Except for the cause of sexual immorality." That clause is not in Mark. So why did Mark leave it out and why did Matthew include it? That's fodder for a source critic and that's an illustration of the kinds of things that they look at.

So there are reasons that they have come up with that are generally true for all of the parallel passages in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the synoptics, in other words. And there are a couple of them, three or four of them. The first one: There's a consensus that there was one original gospel. That original gospel may have been written in Aramaic or Hebrew. We do not have a copy of that gospel. All we have are the Greek manuscripts. All we have is Greek. The second reason: There was a common dependence by all three evangelists on oral sources that were already somewhat fixed or rigid. Third point or third reason: There was a common dependence on written fragments that were still under development in the early church. Fourth reason: Two of the writers used one or more of the other gospels in composition.

So those are the basic reasons, and source critics take their stride from those questions as they pursue different features of these three gospels. The last reason in particular, i.e. two of the writers used one or more of the other gospels in composition, that seems to be the preferred option in our day. It seems to be the preferred option since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But even with that, there are more questions for the source critic. So to summarize everything that we've talked about so far, the source critic is trying to

answer the question: What kind of literature is this? What kind of literature are these gospels? How did they arise from the collation, the interaction, the interplay of oral and written traditions, oral and written sources? How did all of that come together? That's what we're dealing with in this clip: source criticism. So, two of the writers used one or more of the other gospels in composition. And so more questions arise. What sort of interdependence do we see in Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Who used who? Basic question.

And so source critics investigated, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century particularly. They investigated the interrelationships of the narratives. And what they saw was that Matthew and Mark often agree against Luke. So if you are able to visualize an angle, say you're taking a geometry course, right? Sort of an angle that's pointing outward this way. Do it in your mind's eye. So what I just said was that Matthew and Mark agree against Luke. They do when the gospels are compared together. Luke and Mark agree against Matthew. But Matthew and Luke, they never agree against Mark ever. And so that was a consistent observation by 19<sup>th</sup> century New Testament scholars who specialized in the gospels. And so they drew a natural conclusion, and the conclusion was from the perspective of order. Mark must be the link between Matthew and Luke because Mark is found in both Matthew and Luke, and so it has to be the source for both. That's the thinking of the source critic.

At the end of the day, in the course of these investigations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were four possibilities of Mark's dual relationship with Matthew and Luke that were identified in gospel studies, and there were six additional possibilities regarding the interrelatedness of Matthew and Luke. So it was very complicated. These were eliminated one by one until the most probable possibility was surfaced and agreed upon by, I would say, generally most of the scholars that study this kind of thing. Three were seriously considered in light of the evidence before everyone kind of settled on the one. And I say everyone loosely because there is still debate and disagreement. There are still people who think that Matthew was the first gospel written. They tend to be smaller in terms of their numbers, but they are a local minority. That's not pejorative on my part. It's just one of those things that has been observed by those who affirm Matthew's priority, pride of place as being the first gospel. Most scholars affirm Marcan priority as opposed to Matthean priority.

But I digress. Three possibilities considered in light of the evidence. Number one, the Augustinian proposal which states that Matthew was the first gospel written, which was followed by Mark and then Luke. So Matthew, then Mark, and then Luke, kind of the order you see in your English Bible. The second possibility is what is known as the two-gospel hypothesis. And it was propounded by a German scholar by the name of Griesbach. And he stated that Matthew was the first gospel, and then Luke, and then Mark. The idea was that Mark was basically an abbreviation of the other two, primarily Matthew. And then the third possibility was the two-source hypothesis. And this proposal held and holds today generally that Mark and another source called Q were used by Matthew and Luke independently of each other. So Matthew used Mark and he used Q. And then Luke used Mark and then he used Q. And there are some scholars who would call the M material as separate from Q material for Matthew, and L material is separate from Q material for Luke, but the Q material is common to both Matthew and Luke, but it's not found in Mark.

Q comes from the German word *quelle*. It simply means source. It was coined by a German theologian by the name of Friedrich Schleiermacher in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as he and others studied the synoptic problem. So it's called Q today. There are some scholars who would go so far as to say that Q was an

actual document that existed. There have been publications on Q. But so far, no one has actually discovered an actual document that we could conceivably call Q. In other words, there is no proof of its existence. But neither can we deny that Matthew and Luke have material that is common to them both. It's about 230 to 250 verses that is common to Matthew and Luke but is not found in Mark. So for source critics, these kinds of things are thorny and interesting, as it were.

So again, just to go back to the third possibility, two-source hypothesis. Mark and Q were used by Matthew and Luke independently of each other. The priority of Mark, Mark being the first gospel written, was first proposed in the 1830s by two scholars, Lachmann and Wilke. Not many gospel scholars today hold to Mark and Q. They just like to think that Mark is basically the source for Matthew and Luke. But then they have to ignore the 230 to 250 verses that are common to Matthew and Luke that are not found in Mark. Some prefer, like I said, to just hold to just Mark as the first gospel.

So Matthean priority, as was noted previously, was the assumption that was held by many scholars, many in the church until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century because of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century testimony of a church father by the name of Papias. He supposedly lived from 60 to 130, so he bridged the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries of the early church. Lucan priority was never a consideration in this kind of a discussion, so the debate is between Matthean priority and Marcan priority. So I want to pick up on this in the next clip and discuss what Papias actually said as recorded by the church historian Eusebius in his history of the Christian church.

So as I said in the prior clip, I want to deal with Papias' comments as recorded by the church father Eusebius who was a historian. He wrote in the 4<sup>th</sup> century on the history of the Christian church. So what he said that Papias said, as he recorded it, was this: "The presbyter (that would be the elder) also said this. Mark, having indeed become Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately the things said or done by Christ (as much as he remember, that is) because he neither heard the Lord nor followed him. But later, as I said, he followed Peter who modified the teaching according to the need but did not set the discourses of the Lord in order, so that Mark did not sin. Thus, he wrote some things as he remembered, for he gave attention to one thing: to not neglect what he heard or lie about anything. These then are the things which Papias narrated about Mark." So that's Mark. But what's interesting is that in the very next segment of this Papias tradition, he talks about Matthew. So he says, and I quote, "Now concerning Matthew, he said these things. Then Matthew indeed composed the history and narrative of the words in the Aramaic tongue. Each one interpreted these things as he was able." And that's the relevant tradition from Papias. And Papias said some other things, but that is the relevant information that we need.

So this tradition tended to see Matthew as the first gospel written because the dating of the Papias tradition of the life of Papias, he was a bishop of Hierapolis, which was sort of a part of a tri-city collection of Laodicea, Colossi. You'll recall those names. The letter to the Colossians, right? Hierapolis was 10 to 12 miles away from Colossi. Laodicea was about 10 to 12 miles from both. And they were in what is now known as Southwest Turkey, Asia Minor. And Ephesus was 100 miles west of those three cities on the coast, at the mouth of the Cayster River, and so on and so forth. But there was a problem with dating Papias. Papias used to be dated much later. He was pushed into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by most scholars. And then the pendulum gradually swung back with newer scholarship that challenged the earlier scholarship. And so Papias, the time of his writing was pushed into the late 1<sup>st</sup> century instead of being towards the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

Well, that does some interesting things. It puts him closer to the eyewitnesses, the apostles, the authorized bearers of tradition. It puts him closer to learning teaching. So if you go back to what I said, that Papias said about Mark, the presbyter or the elder also said this. Mark became Peter's interpreter. He wrote accurately the things said or done by Christ as much as he remembered because he neither heard the Lord nor followed him. He followed Peter. What that means is that Mark became Peter's interpreter. He followed him around. He was his protégé. The elder, that's a real question that's being debated to the present moment. Who is this elder? Was it John the elder but not John the apostle? Or is John the elder actually John the apostle? That's an ongoing debate because of the dating of the Papias tradition, what I call the Papias tradition as recorded by Eusebius.

But anyway, back to Mark. Mark did not hear the Lord. He did not follow him. He wasn't there at the outset. He's sort of like a second generation Christian. But he follows Peter, and Peter modified the teaching according to the need. That means Peter went around when he preached about the Lord, wherever he went. He preached at Rome. He preached at other places. And wherever he went, he would just start talking about his time with Jesus. He would tell stories about Jesus. He would just do what New Testament scholars call "krea", anecdotes. They were just anecdotes. They were basically little vignettes that were comprised of direct discourse and sometimes a discourse that narrated the content of that direct discourse. Direct discourse simply means the words that people actually say that you read in a narrative. "So and so said," and then you see the quotes, and then you see the utterance. That utterance is direct discourse. "So and so said" is the indirect discourse. They're both connected and they feed off of each other. They give you meaning and significance when you read it.

So Peter would go around and he'd just tell these stories about Jesus. But he didn't set the stories in order. Peter was not concerned to give a historical narrative about Jesus. He just wanted to talk about Jesus. Big difference. Well, what Mark did was he followed Peter around and he gradually collected these sayings of Peter. He collected these anecdotes and then he arranged it into a gospel. That is one consideration or one conclusion that can be drawn from this part of the Papias tradition. Not every gospel scholar does that, though. Most gospel scholars who deal with form, source, and redaction criticism in the mainstream do not wish to rely on early church history or tradition. They seek to basically reconstruct the historical background of the gospels and then draw their conclusions from their reconstruction. There is a distrust, a skepticism, as I've said earlier, particularly with form critics, as to the historicity of the early church. How well did they do their history? Was that history biased? Well, we know today that all history has a certain element of bias to it. All histories are biased, in fact. They're biased towards one viewpoint or another. There's always ideology when you're dealing with historiography. But when these conclusions were drawn in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that modified understanding did not exist. So it's a fine mess but it's exciting. It's something to study.

So positively speaking, Mark follows Peter. He collects these anecdotes. There are quite a few of them. He puts them together into a gospel. It seems to be a simple conclusion, although not everyone is on the same page with that. Not everyone would agree with that. And then he talks about Matthew, Papias does. He said Matthew composed a narrative in the Aramaic tongue. Now, as I said a few clips prior, Matthew, according to tradition, fairly strong tradition, composed his gospel in Aramaic, Hebrew dialect, but we do not have Aramaic Matthew. What we have is Greek Matthew. We have Greek manuscripts of Matthew. We have no Aramaic Matthew. And yet it is a persistent, strong tradition that he did, in fact, compose his gospel in Aramaic.

What scholars have discovered with Matthew and with Mark in particular, not so much Luke, Matthew and Mark, are what they call Aramaisms or Semitisms. Semitisms is the older term. Aramaisms is more recent. It simply means that the syntax of the narrative seems to conform to the form that you see with respect to the verb and the subject in Hebrew Aramaic. You see some of that same arrangement in the Greek. And so there appears to be a Semitic influence on Mark and Matthew. But no one is going to go out on a limb and say, “Hey, that means that Matthew really did write his gospel in Aramaic.” We have no proof that he, in fact, did that. All we have and it’s not enough to draw a conclusion are these Aramaisms.

So here we have Matthew. Then he composed a history of the words in the Aramaic tongue. So most people would take these elements of the Papias tradition and they would say, “Well, Matthew wrote his gospel first.” But they don’t base it just on this. Some do, but most base it on the other historical traditions that we have about the gospel compositions that Eusebius, the church historian, also records, which basically states that Matthew wrote his gospel first. We also have the testimony of church fathers, like Augustine, and his opinion was quite influential. It was influential for centuries that Matthew was the first gospel written. It’s only with the results of the studies, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that that was seriously brought into question.

So that’s the Papias tradition. What am I saying about the Papias tradition, to sum up? So Eusebius, church historian, records Papias. And if we take the modified chronology of Papias, pushing him back into the last 1<sup>st</sup> century and more out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century instead of placing him squarely in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century like older scholarship did, so we put him closer to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, towards the end of it. Well, that puts him closer to the eyewitnesses, the bearers of the tradition. He may have been in touch with at least one apostle, so the thinking goes. And if that’s true, then this tradition takes on importance. And if you read it closely, one could in fact make a case that Papias was actually suggesting that Mark was written first, although one can’t be dogmatic about that. So the debate swings back and forth. It’s a debate. There are no hard and fast conclusions. With the exception though that the general consensus based on the study of the interrelationship of these three gospels, the consensus is that Mark was written first. And that’s a pretty strong consensus and the evidence leads heavily in favor of that.

So Mark becomes Peter’s interpreter. He writes then the oral sayings that Peter used. He is careful to omit nothing of what Peter said. He probably wrote in Greek. He rendered the oral sayings from Aramaic, hence the Semitic influence. Peter’s teaching didn’t follow a chronological format. He adjusted his ministry according to need. Mark may have tried to arrange the sequence of the oral tradition, but this would have been a difficult, if not impossible, task. So Papias asserted that Mark didn’t do anything wrong. He defended Mark. All Mark did was recount the oral tradition as he had heard it and as accurately as could be expected in writing. Papias’ comment on Matthew indicates that the apostle wrote after Mark. That can actually be read that way, although most do not read it that way. But that kind of an argument would take too long to elucidate here, and that’s not why we’re here.

The other argument is for the priority of Mark. Mark is shorter than Matthew or Luke, and that appears to argue for the use of Mark by Matthew and Luke subsequently. In other words, it’s easier to argue for a longer work utilizing a shorter work than it is to argue for a shorter work as an abridgement of a longer work, although the possibility does exist. That’s the first one. The second point or second argument: All three gospels demonstrate verbal agreement. Matthew and Luke do not agree, but they individually agree with Mark, right? Matthew and Luke follow their own particular pathway, which is to say that

Matthew and Luke, they take Mark and they arrange him differently in the construction of their narrative. They break up Mark differently. They don't use Mark the same way. That's the second argument.

Third argument: Matthew and Luke do not agree against Mark with respect to the order of events. Matthew and Luke never go against Mark. That's an earlier point that I made with the hand and finger demonstrations. And there are two more arguments for that. The fourth argument: Mark's composition is not grammatically precise. It contains syntactical constructions that have been called inelegant. He also has more Aramaic expressions than the other two evangelists who would have tended to elimination of awkward sounding grammar. In other words, Matthew and Luke, as they used Mark, they had an opportunity to clean up the syntactical constructions they did not agree with while retaining the content of what he had said or narrated.

Fifth, Mark demonstrates a more primitive theology. So you might flashback to the exception clause with respect to Jesus' teaching on divorce and confrontation with the religious leaders. In Mark, there is no exception clause. Jesus just says, "No divorce for any reason." But in Matthew, Matthew says, "With the exception of..." If you correlate the Papias tradition, you will recall that Mark did not follow the Lord. He followed Peter. And all he could do was record what Peter was saying anecdotally. He would translate it from Aramaic, which he understood, which was his native tongue. He would translate it into Greek. And the syntactical constructions were not all that great. They were inelegant. Matthew, on the other hand, is an eyewitness of Jesus. He was there when that confrontation took place, so it's more likely that he remembers that Jesus said, "Except for the cause of sexual immorality," which is why he would place it in his gospel and Mark would not place it in his because Peter is not concerned to be chronological or historical. He is simply telling stories about Jesus.

So it seems best to come up with the conclusion that Matthew and Luke used Mark to compose their own narratives and they tended in a more historical direction. Of course, the one that really exhibits that is Luke because Luke states in the first four verses of chapter 1 to his patron Theophilus that he intends to set things in order, arrange them in order so that Theophilus would know the certainty of the things that he was taught.

So we come back to Q to summarize all of this. Q, the material Q, the 230 to 250 verses that are common to Matthew and Luke, we can't simply cast them aside. They are there. You don't find them in Mark. There is significant disagreement between Matthew and Luke on the matter of the sequence of events, and this points to the idea that the two evangelists did not use each other. They used an additional source. They used Mark. They both did. But they arranged Mark differently. But they did not use each other. Matthew did not use Luke. Luke did not use Matthew. They used an additional source. Some people call that Q. Not all agree on this, but we can't discount the possibility that Q may have been many sources. It may have been a combination of oral and written sources. Again, we don't know. All we know is that there are these 200 odd verses common to Matthew and Luke. Certainty therefore is impossible at this point.

The two-source hypothesis is the best overall explanation for the data, but it is a working theory for gospel scholars. There is an assumption of Mark and something that we agree we can call Q, although we have no proof for the existence of Q. Sometimes when we're looking at any particular passage in the gospels, the two-source hypothesis, Mark and Q, may not be the best explanation for the content of the passage. In other words, the working theory does not always work.