

METHODS OF GOSPEL ANALYSIS

I. The Gospels: Methods of Contemporary Analysis

A. Source Criticism

What we have been doing.

B. Form Criticism

See the previous lecture on form criticism.

Form critics study the Gospels and try to identify places where small units of oral tradition have been incorporated into the written documents. These short paragraph units are called *pericope* (**lit “to cut around”**). These units become apparent when we look at Throckmorton’s Gospel parallels and see not only the core similarities of certain units (tradition), but also that the Gospel writers arranged these units in their own chronology (framework). Thus form critics make a distinction between *tradition* and *framework*.

As we noted, form critics classify the oral tradition according to “forms”:

- Pronouncement Stories
- Parables
- Miracles Stories
- Legends
- Myths
- Genealogies
- Hymns

C. Redaction Criticism

1. Redactors

The writers of the Gospels are called **redactors** because they were editors. When the Gospel writers set about to write what we now call the Gospels, they undertook an enormous task. They had to gather hundreds of pieces of oral tradition as well as written tradition that was available to them.

The Gospel writers did not just string the oral units together in a haphazard way. They took very personal interest in creating coherent narratives that would reveal the true significance of Jesus as each of them understood him.

2. Redaction critics

Scholars that study the way the Gospel writers organized and edited their material are called **redaction critics**. When we compared Gospel parallels, we were playing the role of redaction critics. We were to some extent looking at the unique ways Luke and Matthew edited or redacted Mark.

The idea is that if we studied the editorial habits of a certain Gospel writers, like Luke and Matthew—noting the kinds of changes they make to Mark—we could determine Luke’s unique beliefs and Matthew’s unique beliefs. Redaction analysis is less helpful when looking at Mark, M, or L, because we don’t have sources for comparison.

Redaction critics do two basic things:

First, they make general observation about *the overall structure* of each Gospels. For example, Luke devotes ten chapters to describing a journey to Jerusalem. Once they notice this, redaction critics seek to determine the significance of organizing the Gospel story in this way. Is it to provide focus attention on the importance of Jerusalem and Jesus’ destiny to die in Jerusalem? Or is the city of Jerusalem important for its own sake as God’s holy city? Or does Luke want to call Christianity back to its Jewish roots, back to Jerusalem, by highlighting the Jewish capital for the life and ministry of Jesus?

Second, redaction critics also examine the *immediate contexts* of individual passages? Why does Luke place the genealogy in between Jesus’ baptism and the temptation narrative? Why does Matthew group a series of seven “woe” or warnings against the Pharisees in chapter 23? It’s not in any other Gospel. We can learn something about Matthew and his concerns by observing how he places these warnings in the overall framework of his Gospel.

D. Narrative (Literary) Analysis

1. Rhoads, Michie, & Dewey, *Mark as Story* (1999).

In the last two decades, the insights drawn from literary works (fiction) have been applied to the Gospels. Narrative criticism of the Gospels began with the 1982 publication of *Mark as Story*. The Gospel was seen as a narrative with a carefully constructed plot with carefully crafted characterization of the individuals in the story. The narrator (Gospel writer) invites the reader into the “story world,” which is full of conflict, suspense, and unexpected reversal. The reader is encouraged to sympathize with some of the characters, but not with others.

2. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1983)

In 1983, Culpepper adopted a similar approach. He considered plot and characterization as well as the Gospels use of symbolism, irony, and the so-called ‘misunderstanding’ motif. Narrative critical studies have also been applied to Luke and Matthew.

3. Gospels ‘not window’ but ‘mirrors’

With narrative analysis, we do not distinguish between the tradition and the framework. Rather, we look at the Gospels as a whole—a carefully crafted literary work of art, not to be split apart, but to see each element as intimately and significantly related to other elements in the story.

The text is not like a *window*, but like a *mirror*. A Gospel is not seen as a window through which we “see” sources and history back then-and-there. Rather a Gospel is more like mirror in which readers “see” the world in which they themselves live.¹

We are not concerned with using the Gospel to look *behind the text* to find its sources and history, but we are concerned with *world within the text*. By allowing ourselves to live in the world of the text, we are able to learn something about ourselves and our relationship in this world, the real world outside of the story.

In this approach, the text is self-sufficient; the author’s intention and background are very important to the analysis. The concern is with the whole text—the final form—as it stands.

II. Narrative Analysis

Narratives or stories are made up of two dimensions: the story and the discourse.

A. Story (what is told)

1. Plot

The plot of the story involves the sequence of events that occur within the story. Traditionally, the most important feature of the plot is conflict or tension.

Conflicts can be external (between groups of people, for instance) or they can be internal (psychological). Sometimes the conflict will be cosmic (spiritual warfare) and sometimes it will be more mundane.

Each gospel will have a plot (conflict/resolution), since a gospel is a story/narrative. Individual stories within the gospels will also have plots. These are called sub-plots. In order to understand a narrative sub-section within a gospel it is important to understand the plot.

2. Characterization

A good story has characters with whom the reader can identify.

a. Flat characters

If a character is not life-like, we sometimes say that that character is one-dimensional or flat characters. The religious leaders in Mark are flat characters.

b. Round characters

In order to be three-dimensional, characters need to be presented with both good characteristics and human frailties. Jesus and certain disciples are round characters.

¹ Gram Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Second Edition, Oxford 2002) 32.

3. Setting

The setting can involve elements of geography, social context or historical context. The setting can help the reader to understand both the plot and characterization.

The geographical setting involves the physical location of events. The Temple, mountains, lakes, synagogues, rivers, and homes carry and symbolic value.

The social context involves what people are doing. For instance, they may be eating together or fishing.

The historical context helps us to understand the significance of events and activities. For instance, testimony by women is significant in a culture in which women have little or no legal standing.

4. Theme

The theme is the major insight of a story; it is the controlling idea that is revealed by a story.

What is the theme of Mark? “The Kingdom of God has dawned in the person of Jesus Christ—the unique Agent of God (Son of God, Messiah, Son of Man)—who triumphs over evil in power and in suffering” (JT).

In a complex story that is made up of many smaller stories, the themes of the sub-story can help the reader to determine the theme or themes of the larger story. As is true also of plot, the theme of a story can be stated in more or less detail.

B. Discourse (how the story is told)

1. Distinctions:

- a. **Real author.** The historical person who wrote the Gospel. Perhaps someone named John Mark.
- b. **Implied author.** We don't have access to the real author. We have access to the implied author, which is the literary, created version of the real author. The implied author never communicates directly. The whole work conveys to the reader an impression of the implied author, what the implied author must know to say certain things through the narrator.
- c. **Narrator.** The narrator is the one telling the story to the reader.
- d. **Example.** Samuel Clemens (Nov 30, 1835 to April 21, 1910) is a famous American writer (real author). He wrote using the pen name Mark Twain (implied author), who had a boy named, Huck, narrate a story in the first person, using the accent, grammar, and slang of a back-woods kid (*Huckleberry Finn*).

2. Narrator

In the biblical narratives, the narrator is usually an omniscient narrator. That is, the narrator tells the reader things that an observer of the event might not be able to observe.

1. Mark's narrator speaks from outside the story world. He is not one of the characters, so he becomes an authoritative voice, which we are generally unaware of.
2. Mark's narrator is not bound by time or space and is omniscient. The narrator knows the whole story. He is omniscient. He gives us access to thoughts of characters. He tells the reader of events that happen simultaneously, even though no single observer could see both events. The narrator chooses which elements to include or exclude, and that profoundly shape the meaning of the text.

“With unlimited knowledge of the omniscient narrator leads the reader to trust the narrator as a reliable guide in the world of the story.” (RMD: 41)

3. Mark's narrator guides the reader by “asides”.

Mk 7:19 Jesus “thereby pronounced all food clean”

Mk 13:14 “let the reader understand”

Mk 7:3-4 explains that “defiled hands are unwashed hands”

Mk 12:18 explains that the Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection

It is also important to note when the narrator is commenting on the story rather than telling the story. The editorial comments can help the reader to understand the meaning of the text.

4. Mark's narrator gives the reader privileged knowledge. The reader knows the secret identity of Jesus from the very beginning. No character in the story knows that except God and Jesus. This makes the reader an “insider,” in the know. In the way, the reader is moved toward the point of the view of the implied author.
5. The narrator's point of view refers to the evaluative perspective of the implied author. To become aware of the narrator's point of view, imagine telling the story from the perspective of the Pharisees and high priests.

It is important to note when an event is described from the point of view of a character, rather than from the point of view of the narrator. The evaluation of an event by a narrator (Mark) may differ from the evaluation of an event by a character (the witnesses at Jesus' trial in Mk 14).

3. Point of View

The narrator's standards of judgment (beliefs and values) are implicit in the point of view. This can be called the ideological point of view; the way different characters, actions, and event are judged and evaluated. Mark presents two systems of beliefs or values, two points of view; one is “thinking in God's terms” and the other is “thinking in human terms.” See the chart RMD 45.

4. Literary devices

The author uses some subtle literary devices or rhetorical techniques to persuade the readers to enter into the story world and the narrator's point of view. Identifying these devices will help us to properly interpret the text.

a. Repetition

Repetition usually signifies importance. If a word or theme or symbol or sequence of events is repeated frequently, it is a clue that this word is important. When a sequence of events is repeated, slight changes in the events can be an important clue to meaning.

There are also two-step progressions, such as the healing of the blind man (RMD 49-50), type-scenes, such as Jesus' healings (RMD 51), sandwiched episodes, such as the healing of Jairus' daughter (RMD 51-52), framing episodes, such as the healing two blind men in chapter 8 and 10 (RMD 52), chiasmic pattern (RMD 52-53)

b. Foreshadowing and retrospection

Foreshadowing refers to explicit references to events that have not occurred. E.g., that Judas will had Jesus over, that the disciples will become fishers of men, or that Jesus will be arrested, tortured, killed, and resurrected.

Retrospection is when the narrator recounts an event that already happened in the story world. E.g., Jesus' riddle about binding the strong man suggests that it already happened.

c. Metaphor and simile

Metaphor and simile involve comparisons between things. A simile makes a direct comparison using the word like or as. For instance, "My love is like a red, red rose" or "As a deer longs for water, so my soul searches for you." A metaphor identifies one item with another item. For instance, "You, Lord, are my Rock."

d. Overstatement

Overstatement, or hyperbole, occurs when someone emphasizes the point being made by claiming or commands more than is literally true. For instance, a mother may say, "Clean your room this instant." She means that her child should start cleaning right away. But an instantaneous start and cleaning are not required. Perhaps Jesus' saying, "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out" is an example of overstatement.

e. Irony

Irony occurs when a narrative includes some sort of discrepancy or incongruity. Laurence Perrine notes that irony is not to be confused with sarcasm; sarcasm is language designed to cause pain. Perrine distinguishes three kinds of irony.

Verbal Irony occurs when someone says the opposite of the meaning that she intends to convey. A father who says to his careless son, "I hope you are proud of yourself for wrecking the family car" means to convey that he hopes the son is ashamed of himself.

Dramatic Irony is the contrast between what a character says and what the reader knows to be true.

Irony of Situation is "the discrepancy between appearance and reality, or between expectation and fulfillment, or between what is and what would seem appropriate." Irony allows a writer to suggest meanings without directly expressing them.

f. Paradox

A paradox is a statement or situation in which apparently contradictory elements seem to be true. Paradox has the value of making a reader take notice. It may introduce a conflict or make one aware of a theme in the story.

g. Denotation and Connotation

Words have both a denotation--the reference of the word--and a connotation--the overtones and atmosphere--created by a word.

For instance, "bastard" and "illegitimate child" have the same denotation, but "bastard" has a more negative connotation.

In biblical studies, knowledge of the original languages is necessary for determining denotation and connotation. Students of the English Bible rely on the skill of translators to choosing an English word which shares both the denotation and the connotation of the Hebrew or Greek word. A good commentary can also be helpful in understanding the connotation of words.

g. Allusion

Allusion is a reference to some other person, event, or work of literature. The ability to recognize an allusion requires the reader to have a broad knowledge of the literature and culture of the time in which a narrative was written. For this reason, biblical scholars work at learning about the broader culture in which the biblical text developed.

5. The Reader

The reader responds to the story in a linear, temporal fashion from the first line to the last. This is a shift of thinking from what the story is about to what the story is doing to the reader or, rather, how the reader is reacting to the story.

The Ideal Reader

The ideal reader is not the actual reader, but the reader that the actual reader must become in order to understand the story.

The real reader might disagree with the ideal author and his narrator. But in order to understand the story, the real reader must become the ideal reader that the author has in mind.

The implied reader goes along with the narrator. The implied reader will “fill in the gaps,” identify with the characters, suspend disbelief, recall the larger story, and allow him or herself to be drawn in by the narrator’s rhetoric—the asides, irony, metaphor, and so on.

Appendix 1: Analysis of Mk 4:35-41

1. Describe the elements of the story.

- a. The **problem** is that a storm is threatening the boat containing Jesus and his disciples. Moreover, Jesus is asleep.
- b. The **solution** comes when the disciples wake Jesus and he calms the storm.
- c. The **evidence** that the storm has been calmed is that the wind dies down and it was completely calm.
- d. The **reaction** of the disciples is to be terrified.

2. Who are the **characters**? Jesus, the disciples, and the crowd. The crowd is mentioned at the beginning (v. 36, note reference to other boats as well.) At the end the disciples and Jesus are the only characters.

3. Where is the **dramatic stress** in the story? It seems to come up twice. In the fear of the disciples and in Jesus response to the disciples.

4. What **role does the miracle** itself play in the story? It ends one crisis for the disciples but it precipitates another. There is an interesting pattern in this story.

- A Terror: The disciples are terrified by the storm.
 - B Rebuke: Jesus rebukes the wind.
 - B' Rebuke: Jesus rebukes the disciples.
- A' Terror: The disciples are terrified of Jesus' power.

Is this perhaps a chiasm? If so, the center of the text would be the calming of the water.

5. **Interpretation** of the pericope.

The dramatic point of the story brings us to Mark's central question: Who is Jesus? An implication of the control over nature is that Jesus is the creator. If there is a chiastic structure, then perhaps the story is suggesting that when we act in obedience to Jesus we can be calm in the face of the apparent storm. But we must stand in fear of the king to whom we are obedient.

Appendix 2: Small Group Discussion of Miracle Stories

1. Divide the class into five groups. Each group is assigned to analyze and interpret one of the miracle stories in Mark 4:35-6:56.

- a. Jesus exorcises the Gerasene demoniac. 5:1-20
- b. Two healings 5:21-5:43
 - Jairus requests help. 5:21-24a
 - The bleeding woman. 5:24b-5:34
 - Jesus resurrects Jairus' daughter. 5:35-5:43
- c. Jesus sends the twelve. 6:7-13
- d. Feeding of 5000. 6:31-44
- e. Jesus calms another storm. 6:45-52

2. Each group should address the following items:

- a. Describe the elements of the miracle:
 - (1) What is the problem in the story?
 - (2) What is the solution to the problem?
 - (3) What is evidence of the cure or resolution?
 - (4) What is the reaction to the miracle?
 - b. Who are the characters in the pericope? Do their roles change?
 - c. Where does the dramatic stress occur in the story?
 - d. What role does the miracle itself play in the story?
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