

A Biblical criticism

The material in this section is relevant to questions on:

- the relationship between the gospels
- biblical criticism specifically
- interpreting parallel passages from the synoptic gospels
- comparing important episodes from the gospels, e.g. the death of Jesus
- the interests, purposes and characteristics of the gospel writers

1

Source criticism and the synoptic problem

Of Mark's 661 verses, Matthew uses 606 and Luke 320; thus there is a **relationship of dependence** between the three synoptic gospels. This gives rise to the synoptic problem: how can the three synoptic gospels be so similar and yet so different?

Are the similarities because:

- the gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?
- they are an accurate historical record of what Jesus did and said?
- they shared a common oral tradition?

These points cannot entirely explain the relationship, which is clearly **literary**, and the most likely relationship is one between the synoptic gospels themselves. The major suggestions have been:

- **Augustine:** Matthew wrote first, followed by Mark using Matthew and then Luke using Mark (Matthean priority).
- **Griesbach and Farmer:** Matthew wrote first, followed by Luke and then Mark, who used both gospels (Matthean priority).
- **Streeter:** Mark wrote first; Matthew and Luke used both Mark and another common source, **Q** (Markan priority).

Markan priority overtook Matthean priority only in the nineteenth century, since when it has been largely agreed that:

Mark's gospel was not the Cinderella among the gospels, as it had been in the early church, but the first gospel to have been written and therefore the gospel with the highest claims to be accepted as a reliable historical source.

Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, OUP, 1989, p. 35

1.1 Reasons for Markan priority

- Mark is the shortest gospel, and it is easier to explain Matthew's and Luke's expansion of Mark than Mark's abbreviation of the other gospels. Key episodes and teaching are not included in Mark; it would be hard to explain Mark's decision to omit the Lord's Prayer, for example.

You may be asked how far Matthew or Luke may be thought to be one of the synoptic gospels. You need to consider whether there are similarities in views and presentation, as well as evidence of a literary relationship with the other gospels.

See how establishing which gospel was written first is essential for establishing the literary relationship between the gospels. If we decide that Matthew wrote first, for example, we reach entirely different conclusions about the relationship between the three synoptics.

In many textbooks you will find extensive material dealing with the question of Markan priority. Most of it is far too complicated and easily misunderstood, so keep things simple. With the time that you will have available in the exam these four points will be more than ample.

The same point applies here. For each main aspect of this huge topic you must establish a quick and easy list of no more than four or five points. Any more than that and you will run out of time, and be in danger of confusing the issue.

- Matthew and Luke appear to have eliminated redundant phrases in Mark, e.g. Mark 1:32: 'At evening, when the sun had set'), and to have tidied up Mark's poorer Greek. Long narratives are abbreviated, e.g. the healing of the Gerasene Demoniac.
- They appear to have softened apparently critical observations about Jesus, e.g. his harshness towards his disciples in the boat (Mark 4:38), and the disciples themselves are presented in a more positive light.
- If Mark wrote first, and was the basis on which Luke and Matthew wrote, there seems to be good reason for the gospel having been preserved in the canon. If Mark copied and abbreviated Matthew and/or Luke, then there seems little reason to have preserved this shorter and in some ways less satisfying account.

1.2 Where does Q fit in?

Holtzmann's two-source theory of 1863 stated that Matthew and Luke used Mark as well as another common source — **Q** — to which Mark did not have access. **Q** comprises about 230 verses including important sayings of Jesus, parables and material about John the Baptist. Note the following:

- Even when Matthew and Luke are not using Mark there is close agreement between them. Such a coincidence is best explained by a literary source.
- Double accounts of the same incident or saying in Matthew and Luke suggest they were working with two sources.
- **Q** material can be extracted effectively to form a gospel of its own, suggesting a coherent collection of sayings of Jesus.
- Even though **Q** is a hypothetical document, it serves better to explain non-Markan agreement than suggesting that Luke used Matthew.

1.3 But what about the differences?

A two-source hypothesis does not adequately explain the differences between Luke and Matthew, however. It is in material found only in one gospel that the particular interests of the evangelists can be traced. **B. H. Streeter's four-document hypothesis** thus incorporated two further sources — **M** and **L**.

1.3a M

About 282 verses of Matthew are unique to him, including his account of the birth narrative, the guard at the tomb, Judas's suicide and Pilate's wife's dream.

To source critics, the kind of Christian Community which produced M seemed to be a Jewish-Christian community which felt obliged to keep both the Law and the scribal traditions.

F. W. Burnett, in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, IVP, 1992, p. 511

The nature of **M** is polemical (critical) of a lax interpretation by some factions within the early church of Jesus's relationship to the Law, and is thus thought not to be as reliable as the other synoptic sources. Jesus is presented as the

For more about these forms of criticism, look at M. A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, SPCK, 1993.

This is quite a complex form of biblical criticism and you are less likely to be asked to deal with it in detail, so all that is provided here is a broad outline of its main aspects. An understanding of its contribution is important, however.

Examples are important if you are to convey your understanding of these different forms. Make sure that you have two or three for each.

2

Form criticism

Form criticism developed in the early twentieth century as scholars sought to establish the earliest traditions behind the gospels. The main scholars associated with form criticism are **H. Gunkel** and **J. Wellhausen** (Old Testament); and **K. Schmidt**, **M. Debelius** and **R. Bultmann** (New Testament).

2.1 Principles of form criticism

- The teachings of Jesus and the gospel material about him circulated orally in individual units for some time before being committed to writing.
- Gospel material had many parallels in other traditions of the time.
- The final written form of the gospels was an unreliable account of the life and teaching of Jesus which had been adapted to meet the needs of the early church communities in their *Sitz im Leben*. The gospel writers had little biographical interest in Jesus.
- It was necessary to remove the layers of elaboration and development that had infiltrated the original units of material in any attempt to establish a reliable text.

2.2 Units of material (pericopae)

Form critics identified six broad categories of forms:

- Legends or myths:** considered the most unreliable gospel material, these deal with the divinity of Jesus and his relationship with God, e.g. birth narratives and resurrection stories.
- Parables:** allegorical or metaphorical narratives that offer teaching on the nature of God or the coming of the kingdom.
- Miracles:** these can be further divided, e.g. healings, exorcisms, nature miracles.
- Pronouncement stories:** narratives ending with a climactic teaching point offered by Jesus, e.g. 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath'.

ultimate interpreter of the Law and as the founder of an eschatological community under the authority of his Father.

1.3b L

L material comprises from a third to a half of Luke's gospel. Indeed, the **proto-Luke theory** argues that Luke may have written a first draft of his gospel before he had access to Mark, the Q and L traditions effectively forming the basis of Luke's gospel. L material includes 14 parables unique to Luke, additions to the passion narrative, and characters including Mary and Martha, and Zacchaeus.

Finally... all three gospels exist independently as well as being interdependent. Any source-critical study must not overlook the fact that each gospel can be read and understood without reference to the others, and using literary critical methods to examine them individually may well do them greater justice than comparing them does. These methods include examining plot, structure, character and the reader's own response to the material in much the same way as a critic might study a modern novel.



A discussion of the value of form criticism — or of anything — should include strengths and weaknesses.

Again, there is much room for complication here, and plenty of highly detailed information about this method in the major textbooks. For your purposes, a summary of the key principles is really most important.

As with form criticism, you need examples to back this up. Make sure you know where your special evangelist has made distinctive changes to his sources, even if you can't give examples of the redactional work of the other evangelists.

- (v) **Speeches:** sayings of Jesus unified into a continuous whole, e.g. the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7).
- (vi) **Individual sayings:** prophetic or eschatological sayings, church rules, sayings about Jesus's person and purpose.

2.3 The value of form criticism

- Form criticism identifies the role the gospel material had in the life of the early church rather than being an accurate reflection of the life and teaching of Jesus. As the early church confronted new needs and circumstances, material could be adapted to suit those needs. For example, Matthew 18:15–22 concerns church discipline and is anachronistic on the lips of Jesus. This does not mean that the forms were entirely lacking in historical reliability, however.
- The importance of the oral period was recognised as bridging the gap between the life of Jesus and the emergence of the written gospels — which was the primary interest of the source critics.
- Identifying the separate forms that comprise the gospels permits an appreciation of how each distinct pericope can be interpreted and how the evangelists chose to group the forms. The gospels are not seen as one continuous narrative from which its individual parts cannot be distinguished.
- 'There is no need to insist that the early church was not interested in setting out the "past" life of the life of Jesus ... the gospels are concerned with the story of Jesus and also with his significance for his later followers' (Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, pp. 23–24).

3

Redaction criticism

Every time you consider the particular characteristics and purposes of the gospel you are studying, you are employing the principles of redaction criticism. So even if you don't know it as such, this is a method already familiar to you.

Redaction criticism is based on Markan priority and concerns itself with examining the way in which the evangelists have used their sources. Redaction critics maintained that the evangelists had been creative in their use of tradition, and that the way in which they compiled the gospels reflected important concerns.

3.1 Principles of redaction criticism

- The final gospel form is studied — not the separate sources or units of material — to establish the changes made by each evangelist to his source material.
- It is thought that these changes provide a clue to the evangelists' theological interests and create the distinctive flavour of each gospel. The evangelists are revealed to be authors, rather than cut-and-paste artists who had no creative role in manipulating their sources.
- The role of the early church is again considered important, since the *Sitz im Leben* of the evangelist's church is likely to have influenced his interests.

- Arguably, redaction criticism changed the direction of gospel study away from the teaching of Jesus himself to a study of the evangelists' presentation of the teaching of Jesus.

3.2 The origins of redaction criticism

- **William Wrede and the Messianic Secret (1901):** Wrede proposed that Mark had written a messianic secret onto Jesus's lips. When faced with questions of his identity Jesus encouraged silence or avoided an unambiguous acknowledgement of his messiahship. This had not been part of Mark's original source material, but was imposed by the evangelist onto the narratives to explain why Jesus had been recognised by so few during his earthly life.
- **Gunther Bornkamm and the Storm on the Lake (1948):** Bornkamm published a decisive article based on his analysis of Mark 4:35–41 and Matthew 8:23–27. He argued that Matthew's changes to his Markan source had effected a reinterpretation, changing the focus of the story from Jesus's divine control over nature to discipleship.
- **Conzelmann and Luke:** while it had traditionally been thought that Luke was the historian of the evangelists, Conzelmann argued that he was a theologian, with a special interest in salvation history.

3.3 The value of redaction criticism

- Redaction criticism provides the basis for an understanding of each evangelist's theological interests. The changing of a single word can give an entirely different slant to an episode or saying. The inclusion of distinctive material into the evangelist's primary sources gives the gospels their individual character, and these differences enhance the theological value of the gospels.
- The principle, however, relies on the four-source hypothesis, which although influential is still a hypothesis (a theory).
- The method may pay too much attention to the additions and adaptations and not to the whole tradition.
- Some changes that were made may not necessarily have the significance that redaction critics would claim they have. A consistent pattern of changes should be seen to be more significant than many unrelated ones.
- The combined purpose of the gospels is appreciated: to convey the historical message of the life of Jesus and to interpret it for its readers. 'History and theology are valid aspects of Gospel analysis, and we dare not neglect either without destroying the God-ordained purpose of the Gospels' (G. R. Osbourne, in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 668).



B Issues of authorship and dating

Questions on authorship and dating will almost always be ones asking specifically about these issues. It is extremely important, however, to be aware that when and by whom a document was written has real implications for its interpretation.

It would not be practical here to provide details of all the various suggestions and counter-suggestions for the dating and authorship of the New Testament books that appear on the AS/A2 specifications. However, what candidates often stumble over is the **significance** of these debates. An essay on authorship and dating can be nothing more than a list of opinions, and in many cases this can still score well. But if asked why it is important to have some idea of the date of a document or its possible author, candidates are often less confident. The following notes focus on these areas. Use them to enable you to evaluate the significance of the different alternatives offered.

1 Authorship

The important considerations are outlined below.

1.1 Is it written by an eyewitness?

If so, there may be grounds for arguing that it has greater authenticity than a document written by a second-hand source. The most likely eyewitnesses would, of course, be disciples of Jesus during his earthly ministry, but the evangelists may have had access to the eyewitness accounts of other observers.

We should be careful not to make assumptions about eyewitness testimony, however. The gospel traditions circulated in oral form for some time before being committed to writing, and the traditions the evangelists used may well have been far removed from their original form. It has been suggested that Luke may have had access to eyewitness testimony from Jesus's mother, and that Mark may have been writing effectively at Peter's instruction.

Some passages do suggest eyewitness testimony. Mark 4:38 describes Jesus being asleep in the boat 'on the cushion', and John 18:5 says that 'Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them'. However, this need not mean that the whole gospel was written by an eyewitness, but rather that the evangelist made use of the eyewitness testimony of others.

1.2 Is it written by an apostle?

This question is relevant primarily to the Fourth Gospel, which appears to make a claim for apostolic authorship at 21:24: 'This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know his testimony is true.' The

These points are linked with biblical criticism. Look at the previous section on this topic for more detail on the way in which the evangelists have used their sources.

Become familiar with the names of some of the apocryphal texts that did not finally make it into the canon. Ultimately, those that did — despite their differences — are those that are most consistent with one another and whose authors were felt to be the most reliable.

passage alludes to the mysterious figure of the **Beloved Disciple**, traditionally identified as John, the son of Zebedee. Nowhere in the Fourth Gospel is this identification made, however, even implicitly. Scholars have argued that the character fits the figure of John Zebedee almost by default:

- He is associated with Peter.
- He is present at key events in Jesus's life.
- He is anticipated as having a central role in the early church.

However:

- He is never named, nor is James, his brother.
- The Beloved Disciple could be anyone who was close to Jesus and not necessarily even one of the Twelve.

Interestingly, even if the Fourth Gospel is the work of an apostle, it is strikingly different from the synoptic accounts, which raises important questions about historicity and purpose.

This overlaps with considerations about the reliability of the New Testament canon and the criteria established by the early church for the inclusion of a text.

1.3 What internal evidence is there for authorship?

Internal evidence is that which is provided by the text itself, not from other sources. None of the gospels name their author (the names are traditional, not part of the original texts), and so internal evidence has to be gathered piecemeal. Despite its lengthy statement of purpose Luke's gospel does not name its author, but it is clear that it is by the same hand as the book of Acts. The themes established in Luke are developed in Acts, and the style of writing and use of vocabulary is consistent. The famous 'we passages' in Acts, where the narrator switches from third to first person, suggest extracts from a diary, although not necessarily that of the author.

The letters of Paul are attributed to him within the text, and he frequently makes a point of signing off in his own hand (rather than that of an amanuensis). However, this does not guarantee that they are the work of his own hand.

The letters of John are almost certainly not by the apostle John, and may not even be by the writer of the gospel. Rather, the name that is ascribed to a New Testament document is an indication of the authority held by that name rather than a guaranteed claim to authorship. A document attributed to one of the great heroes of the early church would gain far quicker recognition than one attributed to one of their followers.

1.4 What is the value of the external evidence?

External evidence is the information provided by other sources. This is most usually the testimony of the early church fathers writing from the second century onwards. Papias, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine and Clement of Alexandria are among the most well-known early church writers who suggested candidates for authorship of the gospels and Acts. The weight of their testimony is useful,



Given that all suggestions about authorship and dating are purely speculative, it is valid to put forward an argument that it is not especially useful to place too much significance on them. Other considerations could be seen to be more important and worthwhile: how authors develop themes, how they use their sources, what the *Sitz im Leben* of the document might be and how it has influenced the text.

especially if we believe them to be unbiased in their reasoning. They may, however, simply have been repeating what had already become tradition, or what they had heard from another source.

Fragments of text may be especially valuable for dating the gospels. The earliest fragment of John is dated AD 110–150, which leads to a speculative dating of AD 95–100 (allowing time for circulation).

1.5 Is finding an author that important?

If we know that the gospel of Mark is the work of a disciple of Peter we may feel more confident about the reliability of the text. If we know that Acts was written by a travelling companion of Paul we may feel sure that he has the details of Paul’s missionary journeys correct. However, there are always many arguments raised against traditional claims to authorship, so it is worth considering whether it is such an important issue after all.

The gospels do stand alone and are complete narratives in themselves, even if we do not know who was responsible for their final composition. Modern scholarship also tends to postulate community authorship rather than a single individual being responsible for the gospel. The gospels thus reflect the concerns and experiences of a Christian community, not just of an individual.

2

Dating

The dating of the texts can tell us something about the **circumstances** and **cultural movements** that may have influenced the writers. The fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 is considered an important benchmark for dating the gospels. Were they written before or after? Did Jesus prophesy it accurately or were the evangelists putting their experience of it into his mouth? The Synagogue Benediction of c.AD 85–90 is considered valuable for dating the Fourth Gospel. Were Jesus’s followers expelled from the synagogue during his lifetime, as the experience of the blind man (9:22) may suggest, or are the authors writing their own experience back into the lifetime of Jesus?

Dating is also relevant for **eliminating possible authors**. If the Fourth Gospel was written after AD 100 then how likely is it to be an apostolic text? If it was written first — as early as AD 50 perhaps — then the author may be an apostle. But then we are left with the question of why his gospel is so different from the synoptics, when we would expect an apostle to be the most reliable source of evidence. Which tradition is the more authentic?

Dating also tells us something about **how theology was developing** in the first century. Debates about matters of belief and practice continued long after Jesus’s death, and there appears to be a world of difference between the narrative of Mark’s gospel and the apocalypse of Revelation. The birth narratives of Matthew and Luke appear to be dealing with less weighty christological issues than the cosmological prologue of the Fourth Gospel. It may be possible to trace the development of belief through the New Testament documents if we have some idea of their dates.

C Birth and resurrection narratives

The material in this section is relevant to questions on:

- the content of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, and the resurrection narratives in all four gospels
- the person of Jesus (christology)
- redaction criticism
- miracles, virgin birth, myth and symbol
- women in the New Testament
- the use of Old Testament in the New Testament

1

Birth narratives

- The texts are Matthew chapters 1 and 2 and Luke chapters 1 and 2.
- There is no parallel in Mark — the gospel begins with the appearance of John the Baptist.
- The Fourth Gospel jettisons a history-like birth narrative in favour of a **cosmological prologue** tracing Jesus's divine origins back to creation (John 1:1–18).

1.1 Matthew's narrative

1.1a Genealogy (Matthew 1:1–17)

- Matthew is the only gospel to begin with Old Testament-style **genealogy**. Matthew traces the descent of Jesus through the line of **David** from the **patriarchs**, establishing his messianic credentials and the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2–3.
- **Joseph** is a key figure; his obedient responses to dreams and visions are essential for the preservation of the infant Messiah.
- Five women of apparently dubious background are unusually included in the genealogy. Jesus descends not just from the outwardly pure, but from a gentile (Ruth) and a prostitute (Rahab).
- The genealogy identifies three stages in salvation history before the coming of the Messiah: Abraham to David; David to the exile; the exile to Jesus's birth.

1.1b The birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18–25)

- The story of Jesus is told from Joseph's perspective. (Luke's narrative suggests Mary's view of the events.)
- Matthew establishes Jesus's divine conception as being through the Holy Spirit, which indicates the beginning of a new age in salvation history.
- 'Jesus' means 'Yahweh is salvation' and is a form of the Hebrew name Joshua. Joseph's naming of Jesus marks his **legal** acceptance of him as his son, but he obediently gives him the prophetic name instructed by the angel.
- The use of Isaiah 7:14 is the first of ten **fulfilment clauses** used by Matthew. The Hebrew *almah* may imply, but certainly not specify, a virgin, and Matthew appears to have made use of the **Septuagint** (Greek translation of the Old

Whenever you are asked to write about the birth narratives you should hear warning bells! You must draw out the significance of their symbolism rather than merely narrating.

Note how these comments are not narrative-based, but concerned with the significance and interpretation of the material important to the evangelist.



Birth and resurrection narratives

Testament), where the noun *parthenos* is more ambiguous. 'Emmanuel' means 'Jesus is God, tabernacled among his people' (see Isaiah 61:1). Matthew 28:20 echoes this thought.

1.1c The magi (Matthew 2:1-12)

- The magi may represent the gentiles who will come to worship Jesus and to whom the gospel will be spread (28:19), while Herod represents the people of Israel who will reject him (27:25).
- The second fulfilment clause at 2:6 cites Micah 5:2 — the Messiah will be born in the city of David.
- The magi's gifts are prophetic: gold = **royalty**; incense = **divinity**; myrrh = **passion**.
- The third fulfilment clause at 2:15 cites Hosea 11:1 — Jesus is to be the new first-born of God, fulfilling the role that was Israel's.
- The fourth fulfilment clause at 2:18 cites Jeremiah 31:15.
- The fifth fulfilment clause at 2:23 relates to no specific Old Testament text. This reflects the freedom with which Matthew has used his narrative to underline the messianic credentials of Jesus.

1.1d Key issues introduced by Matthew

- Jesus is the fulfilment of Old Testament expectation, and his birth reflects Old Testament traditions.
- In his ministry he will face conflict.
- Jesus's birth and infancy mirror that of Moses.
- God takes the initiative in every aspect of Jesus's birth, compelling man to obey.
- Matthew shows that Jesus is the Son of God. This is Matthew's **evaluative view**.

What we are told in these opening chapters ... points forward to the denouement of the story. The beginning ... hints at the ideas which will be made plain at the end.

Morna Hooker, *Beginnings*, SCM, 1997, p. 42

Jesus is God's supreme agent in Matthew's story, and the purpose of the genealogy ... is to advance this claim.

Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, Fortress Press, 1986, p. 45

A discussion of Luke's narrative is the one most likely to degenerate into a Sunday school-type fable. Use the headings suggested here to keep your discussion academic.

1.2 Luke's narrative

1.2a John the Baptist and Jesus

Luke **parallels** the births of Jesus and John but always makes it clear that Jesus is the greater:

- Both are born miraculously of pious Jews.
- Their births follow the Old Testament pattern of great men of God and are announced by angelic messengers.

- John is the **Prophet** of the Most High, Jesus is the **Son** of the Most High.
- Some tenuous connection is made between Mary and Elizabeth.
- Both grow up as children with great spiritual wisdom.

1.2b Prophecy

- Luke's narrative contains six **prophetic oracles** concerning the future of both children.
- The spirit of prophecy guarantees the coming of the messianic age.
- God's promises to Abraham are fulfilled.
- Values will be reversed and popular expectations challenged.
- Luke introduces the Holy Spirit, who will direct events in the gospel and in Acts.
- Jesus's visit to the temple aged 12 (the only infancy story in the New Testament canon) anticipates the place of the temple in his later ministry and for the gospel as a whole, which begins and ends in the temple.
- Jesus's passion is anticipated by Simeon (2:34). Jesus is set to be rejected.

1.2c 'He has exalted those of low degree'

Luke anticipates Jesus's ministry to 'seek and save the lost' (19:10):

- The parents of John and Jesus are not of high worldly status.
- Women are given a key role.
- Mary's song (1:46–55) praises God for lifting up the oppressed.
- Mary and Joseph are portrayed as staying in humble accommodation.
- Shepherds are the first visitors to Jesus.
- Jesus's parents offer the poor man's offering of two doves or pigeons at the purification.
- Jesus's 'human' upbringing is stressed.

For Luke, this ... is not a sentimental tale to delight his readers; it prepares them for what is to come, and for those who know the events yet to be told it is full of premonition.

Judith Lieu, *The Gospel of Luke*, Epworth Press, 1997, p. 20

2

Resurrection narratives

The New Testament asserts that something over and above the Good Friday event happened in the experience of the first disciples, something more than them coming to a new assessment of the meaning of the event of Good Friday. Even the most sceptical historian has to postulate an 'x' as M. Debelius called it.... What is the precise content of this 'x'?

R. H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, SPCK, 1972, p. 2

Remember that like the birth narratives, the resurrection narratives are not designed simply to amaze, but to link with themes that have already been established as important for the gospel.