# BIB203 NT1 Life of Christ

## Unit 3 Readings

Fowler, “Using Literary Criticism on the Gospels”

Dodd, “The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments”

Presented by the


For Use by the

**Blue Letter Bible Institute**

**Web: Study.Bible**

A Ministry of the

**Blue Letter Bible**

**Web: BlueLetterBible.org**

# Using Literary Criticism on the Gospels

by Robert M. Fowler

Dr. Fowler is Professor of Religion and Chairperson of the Department of Religion, at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio. His web page is http://www.bw.edu/~rfowler, and his email address is rfowler@bw.edu. .

This article appeared in the Christian Century May 26, 1982, p. 626.  Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.christiancentury.org. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

SUMMARY

The challenge that literary criticism presents is to rediscover a sense of the wholeness of each of the Gospels. When we do that, we will begin to hear once again the unmistakable voice of each individual evangelist as he tells us his own version of the story of Jesus, from beginning to end.

The evangelists are genuinely authors, authors using traditional material but nonetheless authors: they write for a definite purpose, they give their work a distinct and individual structure, they have thematic concerns which they pursue, the characters in the story they each tell function as protagonists in a plot, and so on. . . If the evangelists are authors, then they must be studied as authors, and they must be studied as other authors are studied.

So wrote the late Norman Perrin in an article published ten years ago (Biblical Research 17 [1972]: 5-18). At that time his viewpoint was novel, but it was a sign of things to come. Now literary critical approaches to the Bible are commonplace in scholarly journals, at scholarly meetings and in publishers' lists of new books. Methods of biblical scholarship are rapidly changing, but one can safely predict that viewing the biblical texts as literature and using the critical methods commonly applied to non-biblical literature will obtain a prominent place in academic study of the Bible. Literary criticism also offers many possibilities for enriching the devotional and liturgical use of the Bible.

Rather than trying to survey the entire field of literary critical approaches to the Bible, I would like to keep my reflections narrow and personal. This means offering some small tribute to Norman Perrin, who first showed me the promise of a genuine literary criticism of the Gospel of Mark. Although my reflections will relate specifically to the literary criticism of the Gospels, much of what I will say applies equally well to the other New Testament literature and to the Hebrew Bible.

When I came to the University of Chicago in 1974 in order to study the Gospel of Mark with Norman Perrin, I had no idea that I would become a "literary critic." Before coming to Chicago, I knew of Perrin chiefly from his widely praised book on the authentic teaching of the historical Jesus, Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus (Harper & Row, 1967), and from his small but highly regarded book, What Is Redaction Criticism? (Fortress, 1969). Consequently, I arrived in Chicago expecting to do "life of Jesus research" and redaction criticism with a master. But when I arrived, Perrin was calling himself a literary critic. He was reading, discussing and doing literary criticism with anyone who was interested -- students and colleagues alike. Some of us winced when he boldly called himself a literary critic, for he and we were still new to this business. But boldness was Perrin's trademark. In his case, the urge to be always in the forefront of the development of his discipline was spurred in part by the specter of ill health that haunted him. He had no time to waste, and he had an unerring sense of direction. He sensed which way

our discipline was headed, pushed forward as far as he himself could, and encouraged many students and colleagues in the relatively short time he had.

When I began to study with him, Perrin was arguing that literary criticism was emerging as the methodological heir to redaction criticism. He said that redaction criticism had been so successful in demonstrating the theological viewpoints of the Gospel writers, and that the evangelists' influence on the traditional material they were editing had been found to be so pervasive, that it was no longer possible simply to characterize the Gospel writers as collectors and editors of tradition. They were much more than that: they were authors -- authors who had made use of traditional material, but authors nonetheless. Curiously, redaction criticism was so successful that it led one to discover its own shortcomings and thus to move beyond it. As the biblical scholar and literary critic Dan Via so aptly put it, redaction criticism "mutated into a genuine literary criticism.

It is crucial to realize the magnitude of this "mutation." Literary criticism is not simply the methodological heir to redaction criticism; it is not just the latest faddish approach available to the student of the Gospels. It represents a significant shift in perspective away from the concern for historical matters that has dominated biblical studies for so long. I will describe the development of the historical critical approach to the Gospels, so that it will be clear how a literary critical approach is different.

The historical critical approach to the Gospels (and to the whole Bible) came into its own in the 19th century. In Gospel studies this was primarily the era of source criticism, the quest for the written sources that were thought to lie behind the Gospels as they now exist. Source criticism was necessary because there seemed to be a direct relationship of dependence among the Gospels. Near-verbatim repetition among the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke makes unavoidable the conclusion that at least one of them functioned as a written source for at least one of the others. The solution most widely agreed upon to the question of who is borrowing from whom is still the Two-Source Hypothesis, according to which Mark is understood to be the first Gospel written, and Mark and the hypothetical source Q are proposed as the primary written sources used by Matthew and Luke.

An important footnote to this chapter in the development of modern biblical scholarship is the fact that source criticism was often called (and still is sometimes called) "literary criticism." This is an indication that 19th century biblical critics were initially concerned with the Gospels as literature. But the first, most glaring literary problem they had to grapple with in the Gospels was the matter of sources. As a result, what they called literary criticism was rapidly reduced to the search for the written sources lying behind the biblical books. Nineteenth century literary criticism of the Gospels thus dealt not with them but with their prehistory. When modern literary critics speak of their task, they do not reject insights into the sources lying behind a text, but they place the emphasis on the text itself, as a finished literary construct.

In the years after World War I, form Criticism was developed; it maintained the focus on the prehistory of the text. The form critics attempted to isolate the discrete units of oral tradition preserved now in the written Gospels, and they assessed how the form of each individual pericope had been shaped by the sociological context in which it originally had been used. Here we see not only the same focus on the prehistory of the text that had been prominent in source criticism, but also the tendency already strong in source criticism to fragment or disintegrate the text in search of its antecedent components. This is another of the legacies of the historical critical enterprise as it has been conducted by biblical scholars:

the penchant for disintegrating the text into earlier and therefore supposedly more significant pieces of material.

The modern literary critic finds no reason to dispute the important insight that much oral tradition does lie preserved in our written Gospels. And the sociological setting of any piece of language, whether oral or written, can scarcely be ignored. But the present-day literary critic is impatient to put all the pieces isolated by the form critic back together, to see what the whole looks like. By way of analogy, I tell my students that one can learn a great deal about a car by tearing it down into its component pieces and studying the form and function of each piece. But unless one puts the pieces back together to see the car functioning as a single, integral whole, one can hardly claim to have understood the car as a car.

Following World War II, redaction criticism came upon the scene. This method began to put back together some, but not all, of the pieces isolated by the form critics. The goal of the redaction critics was to understand the redaction, or editing, of the traditional material by the Gospel writers. In particular, redaction critics have been especially concerned to fathom the theological viewpoints implied by the way the evangelists edited their sources. The redaction critics have discovered a surprising degree of theological sophistication as well as a previously unsuspected degree of coherence in each of the Gospels, but the method is severely limited by its inherited inclination to view the Gospels essentially as edited collections of traditional material. Although redaction criticism tended to give more respect and credit to the individuals who wrote the Gospels than source or form criticism had, it still placed a great emphasis on the prehistory of each Gospel and tended to disintegrate each text into material labeled "tradition" and other material labeled "redaction."

At this point, perceptive scholars like Norman Perrin began to suggest that if the Gospel writers were able to produce a reasonably coherent narrative out of a collection of traditional material, and, moreover, if they successfully communicated their own theological perceptions by the way they, put the pieces of tradition together, then we should start to acknowledge them as legitimate authors. The fundamental insights of source, form and redaction criticism might still be affirmed, with sincere gratitude for the labor of the practitioners of these methods. But the time had now come to resist the longstanding impulse to disintegrate the Gospels in the effort to comprehend the prehistory of each text. It was time to put all of the pieces back together, to see how a Gospel works as a piece of literature, as an integral, literary whole. Thus redaction criticism led Perrin and others to move beyond redaction criticism, and thereby to move away from the focus on historical questions that had dominated biblical scholarship for so long.

It would be rash to suggest that the era of historical criticism in biblical studies was only a prelude to an era of literary criticism. I think it is fair to say that a host of important literary questions about the Gospels have been held in abeyance for a century and a half, awaiting the work of the source, form and redaction critics. It was probably inevitable that questions about written sources, pieces of oral tradition and the editing or redaction of it all would be raised and addressed first. Each of these concerns is necessitated by the nature of the Gospels; each of these factors was involved in their creation. Appropriately, each has received a generous amount of attention for many years. Now it is time to bring forth those other, literary questions that have been waiting in the wings for so long. Perrin conveniently summarized a number of the unexplored literary concerns in the quotation above: the structure of the literary whole, themes, characters, plot and so on.

It is not simply that these genuinely literary concerns have waited quite long enough to be brought onstage. It is also the perception of many scholars that the results of source, form and, especially,

redaction criticism impel one to move on to literary criticism. I found out for myself, in an unforeseen manner, that redaction criticism mutates into genuine literary criticism -- a discovery made in the course of writing my dissertation (now published as Loaves and Fishes: The Function of the Feeding Stories in the Gospel of Mark [Scholars Press, 1981]).

The topic of my dissertation was the two stories of a miraculous feeding of a multitude in Mark: the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mark 6:30-44) and the Feeding of the Four Thousand (Mark 8:1-10). There has been a time-honored consensus, going all the way back to the source critics, that these two stories represent variants of a single traditional story. The Gospel writer included both versions, it is said, almost carelessly. After all, in both versions of the story the disciples seem to have no idea of what Jesus is capable of doing to feed vast crowds. Surely they would not have been so obtuse on the second occasion of a miraculous feeding. Therefore, the standard argument runs, these two stories are actually variants of the same story, each version of which included some mention of the disciples' initial ignorance of what Jesus is about to do. When the evangelist tells essentially the same story twice, the disciples are accidentally made to look incredibly stupid.

That is the usual scholarly accounting of the two feeding stories in Mark. Suspecting that rather than explaining the stories, this theory just explained them away, I applied standard redaction critical techniques to them to see if I could detect where Mark was borrowing from tradition and where he was editing that tradition. I found I could not substantiate the supposition that both stories were inherited by the evangelist from the tradition. The shorter and less colorful of the two stories, the Feeding of the Four Thousand (Mark 8:1-10), may well have been inherited from the tradition -- its vocabulary and compositional style are unlike that of most of the Gospel and may betray an origin in a source used by the evangelist. The Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mark 6:30-44), on the other hand, was probably composed entirely by the Gospel writer. The vocabulary and style of this story was absolutely congruent with the vocabulary and style favored by Mark when he is editing his sources. In addition, careful analysis suggests that the older, traditional form of the story served as a model for the evangelist's own composition.

At this point redaction criticism reaches an impasse. The redaction critic is supposed to find the word or phrase that reveals the editorial activity of the evangelist in shaping the tradition he inherited. But what is one to do when he finds instead that the evangelist has composed an entire story? That is, what is one to do when one finds that Mark was not simply an editor of tradition, but a fine storyteller in his own right? Redaction criticism, with its orientation toward editors and editing, is no longer helpful at this point. If the editor is really an author (who just happens to edit), then we need a critical method that will help us to appreciate and to understand the author as an author and his Gospel as a genuine literary work. Redaction criticism serves us well in our quest to understand the Gospels, but eventually its usefulness wanes, and one must turn to a genuine literary criticism of the Gospels in order to continue the quest.

With regard to the feeding stories in Mark, the interesting literary question is not what the Gospel writer was trying to say when he composed the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Altogether, the storyteller chooses to tell us not one but two feeding stories. It is irrelevant that one story is traditional in origin and the other his own composition. Mark, as the author of the Gospel, bears full responsibility for the entire narrative, regardless of how much traditional material he may have incorporated into the story. The literary critic, concerned with interpreting the Gospel as an integral, literary whole, must deal with both feeding stories with equal seriousness. Therefore, even if my thesis that Mark himself composed the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand were to be conclusively refuted, I would still

insist that both stories need to be taken seriously as episodes in Mark's story about Jesus. From a literary critical perspective, it simply will not do to explain away the tensions arising between the two stories by labeling them variants of pre-Gospel tradition.

One can no longer dodge the admittedly distasteful conclusion that the author intends for the disciples to come off badly in this pair of stories. They look dense because that is the way the author paints them. Indeed, Mark has used rich irony in the feeding stories and throughout the Gospel. When the second feeding incident begins to unfold, it is narrative artistry and not careless editing that makes the disciples say, "How can one feed these men with bread here in the desert?" The reader, remembering the earlier feeding incident, knows very well how Jesus is able to satisfy the needs of the crowd. But the disciples seem oblivious of his power. They skewer themselves on their own words, while the reader watches and learns from their mistakes.

Of course, in a thorough literary critical interpretation of the Gospel, one would expect the portrait of the disciples in the feeding stories to be consistent with the portrait of the disciples elsewhere in the Gospel. This in fact seems to be the case; several scholars have suggested that the theme of the obtuseness and failures of the disciples pervades the Gospel of Mark. Upon further literary study it may prove to be the theme of the Gospel, perhaps replacing the "messianic secret" in the affections of students of Mark's Gospel.

The literary criticism of the Gospels, as illustrated by this interpretation of the feeding stories, has much potential to benefit both the academy and the church. I have already indicated the way in which literary criticism furthers the development of approaches used in Gospel studies, while at the same time it represents a major shift in orientation away from the longstanding preoccupation with historical questions. I have suggested that a host of literary questions have long awaited careful consideration, and that now the time has come to give them the attention they deserve. There is much work to be done in this long-neglected vineyard.

But to state even more sharply the challenge that literary criticism presents to both the academy and the church, I would say that our work is to rediscover a sense of the wholeness of each of the Gospels. When we do that, we will begin to hear once again the unmistakable voice of each individual evangelist as he tells us his own version of the story of Jesus, from beginning to end.

The challenge of literary criticism confronts a guild of biblical scholars who have been predisposed to disintegrate the Gospels into supposed component pieces. The church, too, has often stifled the voice of each evangelist, either by disintegrating his Gospel into bite-sized lectionary texts, or by harmonizing the Gospels, melting them together into one variegated lump of Gospel lore. Few biblical scholars have taken seriously both feeding stories in Mark; similarly, how many sermons have you heard on both stories, as a pair? Such sermonizing would feel awkward for most of us, for that is simply not the way expository preaching is usually done. And yet a literary critical reading of Mark suggests that this pair of stories belongs together, and if we wish to understand what Mark had in mind by writing his Gospel, we had best keep them together. Or to state the challenge of literary criticism yet another way, perhaps we should note that the Gospel writers produced neither volumes of learned exegesis nor sermons. Rather, they told stories; and if we wish to understand what the Gospels say, we should study how stories are told.

http://www.religion-online.org/article/using-literary-criticism-on-the-gospels/

The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments

by C. H. Dodd

C.H. Dodd is recognized as one of the great New Testament scholars of the twentieth century. Dr. Dodd was for many years Professor of New Testament at Cambridge University. This book of three lectures was published by Harper and Row, 1964.

SUMMARY

(ENTIRE BOOK) Three lectures given at King's College, London, in 1935, describing preaching in the early church as found particularly in the Gospels, John and in the writings of Paul.

Preface

The three lectures contained in this volume were given under the auspices of the University of London, at King's College, London, in the Michaelmas Term, 1935. They are printed substantially as delivered, with only a minimum of revision. I have added as an appendix a paper which was read as a presidential address to the Oxford Society of Historical Theology on October 24, 1935. It will be printed according to custom in the Transactions of the Society. I am grateful to the committee and members of the Society for their consent to this anticipatory publication. - C.H.D.

Chapter One: The Primitive Preaching

The very first Christians proclaimed that the great divine event, the eschaton, had already entered history; the Messiah had come, and any day the Lord would be coming a second time upon the clouds of heaven to end the age. When this did not happen, the demand for readjustment was a principal cause of the development of early Christian thought.

Chapter Two: The Gospels

Dodd explains why we cannot expect to find in the Gospels bare matter of fact, unaffected by the interpretation borne by the kerygma, (preaching or proclamation) of the early church. The present task of New Testament criticism is to explore, by a comparative study of the several writings, the common faith which evoked them, and which they aimed at interpreting to an ever-widening public.

Chapter Three: Paul and John

The present task of New Testament criticism is to explore, by a comparative study of the several writings, the common faith which evoked them, and which they aimed at interpreting to an ever-widening public.

Follow the links to read the entire book:

http://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-one-the-primitive-preaching/

http://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-two-the-gospels/

http://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-three-paul-and-john/

Source: http://www.religion-online.org/book/the-apostolic-preaching-and-its-developments/