

## Source criticism and the Gospels

Source criticism is the process of examining a text to determine whether it comes from a previous source. This source could be another written text or derived from oral traditions. The critic's task can range from comparing a simple reading of two texts to the realm of speculation. When the New Testament autographs were written there was no standard referencing system and no plagiarism rules so writers would quote and/or copy their sources without citations. Some writings in the New Testament clearly show that they have used an external source for part of their text by referring to or quoting their source. This can be seen in the letter to the Hebrews which has many quotations from the Septuagint. There are other New Testament texts however over which there is still debate as to whether they used another source or not. This uncertainty and speculation can sometimes lead to the fantastic. This is why source criticism needs to be checked by reasonable historical evidence. This essay will focus on the Gospels which source critics have spent the most time on (SG, p. 13).

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all have overlapping content and they contain the same basic flow and structure. These similarities lead to them being referred to as the Synoptic Gospels which means they all share a "common view" (AGT, p. 69). Source critics assume that whichever Synoptic Gospel was written first would have been later used to help write the other two.

The majority of theories about the Synoptic Gospels believe Mark was the first written gospel and then Matthew and Luke used Mark as a basis. The reasons behind this theory are due to Mark having the least original content with about 95 percent of it found in Matthew or Luke or both (AGT, p. 69). Mark is also the shortest Gospel as it leaves out details that Matthew and Luke seem to have built upon.

In contrast the Griesbach Hypothesis holds that Matthew was written first, Luke was based on Matthew and that Mark was written using both. This view has a number of weaknesses, the primary one being its unsatisfactory explanation as to why Mark would shorten a version of Matthew or Luke and leave out the birth and infancy narrative, most of Jesus' teaching and Jesus' post-resurrection appearance (AGT, p. 72).

Matthew and Luke not only overlap with Mark but also with each other. This overlap leads some source critics to believe that both Matthew and Luke relied on another external source separate to Mark or that one copied from another. The latter theory is not held widely for the same shortcomings as the Griesbach Hypothesis, namely it does not successfully explain why one author would leave out so much detail (AGT, p. 73). Some source critics have assumed a common source between Matthew and Luke which they name "Q", short for the German word Quelle, meaning "source" (AGT, p. 70).

There is debate about whether Q was a written document or from the oral tradition. Luke's Gospel begins by referencing other sources<sup>1</sup>, but his sources may well have come from direct or indirect eye witness accounts and not from a written source. Since Q mostly contains the sayings of Jesus<sup>2</sup> who spoke to large crowds around rural areas it is quite possible that the sayings of Jesus were passed from one person to another and never formally written down. There is no hard evidence for or against Q being a document or part of the oral tradition.

It is agreed that the Gospel of John, was written later than the Synoptic Gospels and has less than ten percent of overlap with them (AGT, p. 74). This implies that John did not have access to the other Gospels or that he chose not to use them as he was writing to make a different point. From reading John's Gospel it is clear that his writing style is different to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:1-4

<sup>2</sup> Q seems to have contained mostly saying of Jesus such as Matthew 6:25-33 and Luke 12:22-31 as well as other parables and stories that Jesus told (Dickson, 2006, p. 44).

other Gospels and his order of events does not seem to be chronological. Due to the small overlap in John's Gospel with the Synoptic Gospels, it is likely the common points came from an oral tradition that was contemporary to the authors.

Some source critics believe that each author of Matthew, Luke and John used another source independently of each other. Matthew and Luke's sources are called M and L respectively whilst John's source is called SQ (German for *Simeia Quelle* meaning Signs Source) as it theoretically contains some of the signs of Jesus such as the water into wine story in John 2:1-11 (Dickson, 2006, p. 48). These internal sources are established by attempting to discover the natural voice of the original author and then noting any deviation from that voice in other parts of the text (Dickson, 2006, pp. 45-48).

The non-existence of Q, M, L and SQ as historic texts reveals the main shortcoming of source criticism. When the text does not explicitly reference a source, the critic will to some extent have to speculate. In cases where two or more texts overlap word for word there is hardly any debate that some form of collusion or citation has taken place. However without any historical evidence for or against hypothetical sources it is hard to determine the exact means and mediums of these sources. We are left with theories that can only be evaluated on their strengths and weaknesses.

The advantage of source criticism is that it adds to the texts historical reliability. Historians use the criterion of multiple attestations to assess whether a historical event occurred (Dickson, 2006, p. 52). Independent sources that say generally the same thing increase the historical accuracy of that event. Another advantage of source criticism is its attempt to find the earliest historical record for the text. The closer the writings are to the event, the less chance the message has undergone interpretation.

Source criticism allows us to understand the writing processes of the Gospel texts clearer and it makes the historical case for the texts stronger. Theories about extra sources behind the text that historians have no evidence for need to be assessed within the limits of what is known and occasionally it is necessary to maintain a healthy balance of uncertainty.

## **Works Cited**

Achtemeier, P. J., Green, J. B., & Thompson, M. M. (2001). *Introducing the New Testament: its literature and theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Dickson, J. (2006). *The Christ files*. Sydney South: Blue Bottle Books.

Neville, D. (2009). *Introduction to New Testament Studies* [THL106 Study Guide]. Wagga: Charles Sturt University.