

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Telling the New Testament
Story of God



SESSION 6

A History of the Study of the Gospels

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A History of the Study of the Gospels

SESSION OVERVIEW

A History of the Study of the Gospels

The Quest for the Historical Jesus

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- gain a perspective on how Western scholars and the Church have understood the development of the Gospels.
- understand the historical problems in getting a historical view of the earthly Jesus.
- trace the issues and conclusions on these problems suggested by Western biblical scholars.

A History of the Study of the Gospels

INTRODUCTION



In previous sessions, similarities and differences between the four Gospels that each present the story of Jesus were observed. Scholars agree there is some literary relationship at least between the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The questions then become: What is the nature of this relationship? Which of the Gospels appeared first? What type of dependence do we find among them? Through the centuries, different answers have been provided to these questions.

A survey of the history of scholarship relating to the Gospels reveals differing scholarly understandings of Jesus himself as a person of history. How reliable is the picture of Jesus presented in the Gospels? If we could travel back in time and see and hear Jesus, would what we hear and see correspond with the picture of Him as found in the Gospels? Concerning this important issue, differing answers are found as well.

A HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF THE GOSPELS

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ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL VIEW OF THE GOSPELS

Augustine (AD 354 to 430), composed a work titled, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, in which he went through a lengthy catalog of problematic passages to explain them. He concluded:

- Matthew was the first Gospel written and Matthew the apostle wrote it.
- John Mark had the apostles Peter and Matthew as his sources and abbreviated Matthew's Gospel.
- Luke and John were written independently or with some knowledge of Matthew and Mark.

SOURCE CRITICISM

Augustine's view prevailed until the last 200 years. Scholars then began analyzing the literary relationships between the four Gospels. They borrowed the methodology of source document theory and developed several progressive theories on how the Gospels developed. This is called source criticism.

- *Synoptic Gospel*. J. J. Griesbach, author of *Synopsis of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke*, introduced the idea of the synoptic (with one eye) Gospel, meaning these three Gospels seemed to follow the same outline or told the story of Jesus from roughly the same viewpoint. He still believed Matthew was the first Gospel and Mark was an abbreviation of Matthew. The order of the Gospels was seen in terms of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
- *Synoptic Problem*. Why were there so many similarities between Matthew, Mark, and Luke and why were there so many differences? Scholars were to develop theories and models to explain the similarities and differences from this point on. The first theory to follow was the Marcan Hypothesis or the Priority of Mark that says Mark wrote his Gospel first and Matthew and Luke used Mark as their outline or primary source for the order of events. This basic model is still the prevailing view.

In 1863, H. J. Holtzmann added another source that was eventually called "Q," for the German word "quelle" meaning source. This source contained the material (approximately 230 verses) Matthew and Luke have in common which is not


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found in Mark. An example is Matt. 3:7-10 and Luke 3:7-9 where John refers to those coming out to be baptized by him as a brood of vipers. So the Marcan Hypothesis took shape as a two-source hypothesis: Matthew and Luke used both Mark and Q as sources.

In 1924, B. H. Streeter wrote *The Four Gospels: a Study in Origins*, where he proposed a four-document theory: Mark, Q, Special Luke, and Special Matthew. Special Matthew and Special Luke stand for the documents, oral tradition, eyewitness accounts, etc., each of these authors had that the other authors did not have access to or did not choose to use. This has become a standard theory for sources of the Gospels.

FORM CRITICISM

In addition to source criticism, another methodology that has influenced the study of the Gospels is form criticism. This is a study of the small units of text such as proverbs, parables, and miracles stories gathered together to form the documents or oral tradition used in the writing of the Gospels. Form criticism, coming primarily out of German scholarship, has its own special terminology. These terms are used in many commentaries today and it is important to know what they mean.

- *Formgeschichte* (German, form history) or form criticism: An attempt to discover the forms of the small units of the text gathered together in the development of the Gospel texts as we know them today.
- *Pericope*: An isolated, independent unit of text studied by form criticism.
- *Sitz im Leben* (German, situation in life) or original life setting: The *pericopae* were analyzed as to their original life setting, or the setting in which these units took the shape or form they have in the Gospels. According to form criticism, most of these units were developed in the context of the life of the Early Church where they were recited and memorized. So they were not developed directly in the context of the life of Jesus. The fundamental presupposition of this perspective was that the Gospel writers were compilers of the stories, sayings, and events of Jesus' life, not authors with a purpose in mind.

Martin Dibelius wrote, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (1919), or later in English, *From Tradition to Gospel*, which was the first major work in form criticism of the Gospels. Rudolph Bultmann wrote *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921), in which he radicalized Dibelius' work, leaving very little of the Gospels that went back to Jesus. He traced most of the Gospel stories to the myth-making instincts of the early believers.


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REDACTION CRITICISM

Another methodology that has affected the study of the Gospels is redaction criticism. A redactor is an editor or author who puts together a story for a purpose. This methodology helped us to see that the four different Gospels are four different versions told from four different perspectives for at least four different purposes. This criticism also developed among German scholars and was begun by some of Bultmann's students: Hans Conzelmann (*Theology of St. Luke*, 1954) and Willi Marxen (*Mark the Evangelist*, 1956). As a result, the following term is often used in commentaries and books on the Gospels.

Redaktionsgeschichte (German, history of editing) or redaction criticism is the study of the redactors (compilers, writers, editors) of the Gospels. Redaction criticism contrasts with form criticism in several different areas:

- Form criticism viewed the Gospel writers as simply compilers of tradition; while redaction critics recognized the Gospel writers were authors with their own agendas and theology.
- Form criticism was concerned with small units of tradition; while redaction criticism was concerned with large units of tradition.
- Form criticism did not develop adequate theological intent for the writers; while redaction critics point out the theological intent of the individual authors.
- Form criticism was concerned with one Sitz im Leben: the Early Church. Redaction criticism was concerned with three different settings: Jesus' life, an oral period of the Early Church, and the Gospel writer and his circumstances.

21ST CENTURY SCHOLARSHIP

There is not one dominating theory today on the Gospels, except that Mark was most likely written first and that one of the sources for Matthew and Luke was a sayings source identified by scholars as Q. Some of the current theories or approaches to the study of the New Testament include:

- *Structuralism*: Underlying all expression and narrative is a structure common to all human minds. When we understand this deep structure we can understand the real meaning of a story. In *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*, John Hayes and Carl Holladay refer to structuralism under the heading: The Universals in the Text. This has become such a complicated and esoteric method that it has had very little appeal.

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- *Narrative Criticism*: This method sees the Bible as a literary production, not just a collection of folk tradition. It focuses on literary techniques, plot, structure, ordering of events, dramatic tension, and intended impact on the reader.
- *Reader-Response Theories*: These theories say the meaning of the text does not lie in its words or in the historical setting of its words, but in its relevance to contemporary cultural circumstances. The setting or culture of the reader provides the context of meaning for the reader.
- *Rhetorical Criticism*: This method identifies the techniques of discourse or argumentation (rhetoric) used by the author or speaker in the text to communicate to his or her readers.
- *Deconstructionism*: This method says a text has no objective meaning and becomes whatever the individual reader takes it to mean. The reader provides the context. Very close to the reader response theories.
- *Sociological Criticism*: A new field of study that has only been delineated in the 1990s, although it has been used in different ways since the 1970s. It includes those who study the social backgrounds of the Bible times through archeology and texts as well as those who attempt to use sociological and cultural anthropological field methods and models to understand the ancient cultures.

THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS



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Have you ever been warned about a person before you met him or her? Have you had someone tell you unbelievably good things about a person before you met him or her? What happened when you met that person? How did the prior knowledge affect that meeting? These are just some of the issues considered by scholars in trying to discover the real or historical Jesus.

THE REAL JESUS

Before the 18th century, the Gospels were seen as divinely inspired books that contained no errors. But this did not mean scholars were not aware of the differences and chronological issues of the Gospels. Thoughtful believers were aware some of the accounts differed and in some places, like the trial and resurrection accounts. It was very difficult to work everything out. They concluded, however, the different versions only meant the events were being looked at from different angles and emphasizing different things.

The Enlightenment (18th century) brought a rationalistic spirit to scholars in European Universities. They took the following viewpoints:

- The Gospels were not the story of Jesus, but stories about Jesus, written by people who did not know Him. Some Gospels were written about 100 years after Jesus died.
- The real, historical Jesus or Jesus of history was buried in a mass of myths, legends, and edited accounts and, therefore, had to be rediscovered.
- The Gospels were not divinely inspired. Everything had to be proven true on rational scientific grounds to be accepted. The Bible is only true where its statements and conclusions are in accord with human reason. The human mind is capable in and of itself of determining what is true and what is false, as well as what is right and what is wrong.
- Historical was defined as excluding the supernatural. So the Virgin Birth, Resurrection, divine healings, exorcisms, and predictive prophecy were not to be considered in a historical investigation. These items are not in accord with what humans can scientifically prove to be true. They do not match the modern understanding of reality. Miracles cannot occur because the universe is under the control of fixed laws that cannot be altered or changed.

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The Search for the Jesus of History or the Quest for the Historical Jesus are the names given to this historical investigation that has continued over the last 200 years. These historical Jesus critics wanted to write a life of Jesus as He really was, not as some people wished He had been, like the Christ of faith. Thus, we find the differentiation among critics between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

Historical Jesus critics wanted to use tools of scientific Bible study, which by definition could not investigate the supernatural. So they set aside the question of the supernatural. Two major works of this type are D. F. Strauss' *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) and E. Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863).

In 1906 Albert Schweitzer, the famous African missionary, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and scholar (earned three doctorates in medicine, theology, and philosophy) investigated findings in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. He concluded none of the writers had found the historical Jesus. Conclusion, their work was only a reflection of their own preconceived ideas. Schweitzer states: "They had taken Jesus out of his own time by transporting him into our times and had modernized him beyond recognition." Without the model of the ancient culture as described in the New Testament, the only way these historical Jesus critics could see Jesus was in their own modern terms.

As a result of Schweitzer's book another German scholar, Rudolph Bultmann, called the historical Jesus a presupposition of New Testament theology. By that, he meant we could not prove anything historically about Jesus, but we must believe He lived or the New Testament and Christianity do not make any sense. He said the important thing was THAT Jesus was and not WHAT Jesus was. Furthermore, he said we must take the early Christian myths and demythologize them by translating them into acceptable 20th century categories, so modern people could believe them. This aspect of his work has become the most famous and most controversial.

Bultmann's students ushered in the post-Bultmannian era, accusing Bultmann of modern Gnosticism because he proposed a system of faith that had no historical basis. They set out on a new quest for the historical Jesus, again using scientific tools. Two of the major works from this period are Gunther Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1956) and James M. Robinson's *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1959).

During the last 20 years of the 20th century, scholars developed many more theories about the historical Jesus. These views of Jesus include:


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- political change agent
- Greek preacher
- zealot
- magician
- moralistic prophet
- confused Galilean peasant
- Greek hero
- Hellenistic sage

A third quest for the historical Jesus developed in the 1980s and 90s with E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (1985); James Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism* (1988); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996); and Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (1990). It emphasizes that Jesus was a Jew, and we can best understand Him and His teaching in the light of first-century Judaism. So there is an increased examination of the diversity of first-century Judaism and rigorous use of historical criteria to determine the authenticity of the Gospels.

REAL WORDS OF JESUS

The quest to find the real words of Jesus followed the pattern of the quest for the historical Jesus. At first there were many topics scholars could agree on that Jesus taught, such as the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the infinite value of the human soul. Then in the 1950s came a renewed attempt to find what Jesus really said. Over the years, 25 criteria were developed to decide what Jesus really said. Example criteria include:

- *Multiple Source Attestation:* A saying found in more than one place in the Gospels is said to be authentic.
- *Palestinian Environment:* A saying that fits first century Palestine is said to be authentic.
- *Aramaic Language:* A saying that is awkward in Greek and makes better sense in Aramaic is said to be authentic.
- *Dissimilarity:* A saying that is different from the beliefs of first-century Judaism or early Christianity is said to be authentic.
- *Embarrassment:* A saying that would be an embarrassment to the Early Church is said to be authentic, since they would not have made it up.


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- *Consensus of Scholars*: A saying is said to be authentic if most scholars agree.
- *Multiple Forms of Statement*: A saying is authentic if it is found in more than one form in the Gospels.

These are just a few of the criteria. As you can see, some make more sense than others. But it was on the basis of these criteria that the sayings of Jesus were judged as authentic or not. In 1986, over 70 scholars banded together in a group called the *Jesus Seminar* whose intention was to answer the question: What did Jesus really say?

They circulated papers among themselves and met twice a year. They developed a voting method to decide what Jesus said by dropping a plastic bead in a bucket for each verse they were considering. The red bead meant: "That's Jesus!" The pink bead meant: "Sure sounds like Jesus!" The gray bead said: "Well, maybe!" and the black bead meant: "There's been some mistake!"

The scholars produced a book in 1993 called *The Five Gospels* with the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas being the fifth one. They color-coded the text with the results of their votes. The outcome indicated they thought only 18 percent of the words ascribed to Jesus were actually spoken by Him. In contrast to most scholars they have deliberately publicized their thoughts to the mass media, giving the impression that they speak for mainstream New Testament scholarship, when they do not.

CRITICISMS OF THE JESUS SEMINAR

One of the outspoken critics of the Jesus Seminar is Luke Timothy Johnson. In his book *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, Johnson criticizes the seminar as a group of people "self-selected on the basis of a prior agreement concerning the appropriate goals and methods for studying the gospels (historical critical) and the figure of Jesus (non-eschatological and non-mythical, a kind of Eastern holy man who speaks in short, profound statements)."

Johnson states they are not representative of New Testament scholars today because, other than Claremont Graduate University, there are no representatives from major graduate New Testament faculties. He goes on to say that; because they assume the Gospels are not accurate histories but narratives from "traditional materials with literary art and theological motives", the whole process is "biased against the authenticity of the Gospel tradition."

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Furthermore, Johnson says Robert Funk, the seminar's founder, "does not conceive of the seminar's work as making a contribution to scholarship but as carrying out a cultural mission"—liberty for the laity from the Church's control of the Bible. Johnson's specific critique of the *Jesus Seminar's* scholarship in *The Five Gospels* is:

- Lack of discernable demonstration or even argument.
- Does not consistently follow the criteria it established.
- Uses cut-and-paste method of choosing what to consider and what not to consider.
- Shares the same literalism and historical positivism [the only authentic knowledge is scientific knowledge] that characterize fundamentalism.

CONSTRUCTIVE EVANGELICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

As a response to these attempts to understand the historical or real Jesus, evangelicals have articulated some constructive presuppositions to guide in our quest to understand the historical Jesus. The first and most important is to accept the Bible as reliable and trustworthy. It is at least a picture of Jesus written by His contemporaries and not some modern reconstruction of what someone thought Jesus was. Second, begin with the presupposition that the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is the same person. Third, acknowledge that historical research does not need to dismiss the supernatural to be accurate. We must carry on our study with the presupposition of God's involvement in the process.

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Read the story of Jesus' temptation in Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13. Examine and discuss these texts in terms of the two-source hypothesis: Mark and Q.
2. Scholars have developed various understandings of the historical Jesus (i.e. political change agent, magician, confused Galilean prophet). Explore discussions and depictions of Jesus in the media (television, film, radio, and Internet). What understandings of Jesus are being depicted, embraced, or rejected? What are the implications of these understandings for the Church and broader society?

EXAM



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1. Most scholars believe that _____ was the first written Gospel.
 - A. Matthew
 - B. Mark
 - C. Luke
 - D. John
2. Until the last two hundred years, the prevailing view was the first written Gospel was _____.
 - A. Matthew
 - B. Mark
 - C. Luke
 - D. John
3. The Marcan Hypothesis maintains that Matthew and Luke used Mark as their outline or primary source for the order of events.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. According to _____ criticism, the Evangelists or Gospel writers were simply compilers of the stories, sayings, and events of Jesus' life. They were not authors with a purpose in mind.
 - A. redaction
 - B. narrative
 - C. source
 - D. form
5. _____ critics recognize differences in the Gospels as relating to the different aims of the Evangelists.
 - A. source
 - B. form
 - C. redaction
 - D. textual
6. The Q source contains traditions found in _____.
 - A. Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark
 - B. Matthew and John, but not in Luke
 - C. Luke and John, but not in Mark
 - D. Mark and Luke, but not in Matthew

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7. _____ proposed a four-document theory involving Mark, Q, Special Luke, and Special Matthew.
 - A. Martin Dibelius
 - B. Rudolph Bultmann
 - C. B. H. Streeter
 - D. Augustine

8. During the Enlightenment, the idea of the divine inspiration of Scripture was renewed and promoted in European universities.
 - A. True
 - B. False

9. Historical Jesus critics attempted to write a life of Jesus that would support the picture of Jesus as found in the Gospels.
 - A. True
 - B. False

10. In *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, _____ asserted that those who wrote “lives of Jesus” had not discovered the Jesus of history, but rather had produced lives that were the reflection of their own preconceived ideas.
 - A. B. H. Streeter
 - B. Rudolph Bultmann
 - C. Albert Schweitzer
 - D. E. P. Sanders

11. _____ maintained that we must take the early Christian myths and demythologize them or translate them in accordance with twentieth century understandings.
 - A. Albert Schweitzer
 - B. D. F. Strauss
 - C. James Charlesworth
 - D. Rudolph Bultmann

12. A quest for the historical Jesus in the 1980’s and 90’s (third quest) emphasized that Jesus was a Jew and can best be understood in light of first-century Judaism.
 - A. True
 - B. False

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13. Concerning the historical Jesus, the scholars who participated in the *Jesus Seminar* are representative of the perspective held by most scholars.
- A. True
 - B. False
14. Scholars in the Jesus Seminar agreed that most of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are authentic.
- A. True
 - B. False
15. Evangelical scholars have affirmed that the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are one.
- A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



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Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. When you try to understand a situation, does it help you to hear different versions or ideas of what happened? Why or why isn't this session of importance to the believer?
2. Is there a way to put faith and research together and analyze the historical Jesus? Why or why not?
3. Discuss some of the 21st century methods of studying the Gospels. Which ones help the understanding of the New Testament? Which ones hinder it? Why?
4. Reflect on who Jesus is to you. What is important to document? What should be accepted by faith?