

Redaction Criticism by Dan Fabricatore

Definition and Description

Above all else, *Redaction Criticism* (RC) is interested in determining how the authors (in a loose sense of the term) “shaped and presented”¹ the sources they had before them. In other words, RC views the evangelists as editors. Grant Osborne notes that RC “is a historical and literary discipline which studies both the ways the redactors/editors/authors changed their sources and the seams or transitions they utilized to link those traditions into a unified whole.”² Robert Thomas notes that as a methodological discipline, RC “examines the editorial changes made by an author to distinguish actual happenings and community embellishments from elements of the text that are traceable to the theological emphases the writer wanted to bring.”³ Similarly, McKnight defines it as “a discipline of historians designed to uncover from a written source the particular contributions of an author to the traditions he utilized in order better to understand his theological viewpoint and setting.”⁴

In all three definitions there is an emphasis placed on the evangelist using the sources before him to manufacture an account of Christ to fit his theological angle and the need for the community to whom he was writing. RC may be defined *as an emphasis on the writer/author/editor of using the sources before him to create or refashion the tradition to meet a specific need in the community*. Therefore RC seeks to determine the original setting and theology of the evangelist. It might be best to say that redaction critics do not look at the evangelists as literary authors but “theological editors.”⁵ Redaction critics seek to determine “why” (assuming Markan priority) Matthew or Luke changed Mark.⁶ Immediately one is alerted to the fact of how historical criticism has influenced such scholars. It is simply assumed that not only did Mark write first, but that Matthew and Luke were dependent upon his final work. This issue is one related to the discipline of Source Criticism (SC) that will be discussed below.

As we will see, the scholars who championed RC in the Synoptic Gospels all set out to arrive at the theological purpose of their respective gospels which they studied.

¹ F. F. Bruce, “Criticism,” in *I.S.B.E.*, 1:824.

² Osborne, “Redaction Criticism,” in *DJG*, 662.

³ Robert L. Thomas, “Redaction Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis*, 250.

⁴ Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels*, 84.

⁵ Thomas, “Redaction Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis*, 250.

⁶ McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels*, 84.

Origins

RC is the third of four disciplines used in the historical-critical methodology for gospel and other narrative studies. *Form criticism* (FC) is interested in determining the original tradition behind the final redacted form in the gospels. It focuses on the embellishments of the Christian community, but as a discipline, it is unable to explain the differences in the Synoptic Gospels. *Tradition criticism* is interested in the process of how this original form arrived in the final form in which we have it. RC is interested in how the author manipulated (for lack of a better expression) the material before him into his final form. A final discipline is called *literary criticism*. It is not interested in the historical background of the gospels, but concentrates on dealing with the gospel in the editor's final form. It holds that the editors had a theological purpose and this can only be defined by looking how the author edited up all his sources, including looking at introduction, conclusions, and redactional activity.

These four disciplines, coupled with the pursuit of determining the *Sitz im Leben* helps the redaction critic arrive at the theological purpose of the writer. While FC was the result of higher German critics such as Bultmann and Dibelius, RC was the product of G. Bornkamm, Hans Conzelmann, and W. Marxsen who practiced their discipline on Matthew, Luke and Mark respectively.

Methodology of Redaction Criticism

RC is built upon the discipline of *Source Criticism*. This is because the results of RC are based upon either Markan or Matthean priority. In order to arrive at fruit from one's employing of the discipline of RC, one must begin with an assumption of who is using whom. This is the nature of the study of SC. SC is interested in what sources the evangelists used to compile their gospel accounts. The predominant theory in New Testament circles is the Oxford Hypothesis that holds to Markan priority. In this view, Matthew and Luke were dependent upon two sources; Mark and a document called "Q." Another possibility in the Oxford Hypothesis is that a total of four sources were the basis for the sources of the gospel accounts, namely Mark, Q as well, a "M" on which Matthew was dependent and a "L" on which Luke was dependent. These latter two sources were simply representative of the sayings peculiar to Matthew and Luke respectively. Osborne notes,

Redaction critics begin with this assumption and study the alterations which the Evangelists made to their sources. This means that the redactional study is most relevant for Matthew and Luke, less so for Mark (we don't know what sources he may have used) or John (independent for the most part from the Synoptics).⁷

Immediately one is made aware of just how dependent RC is upon presuppositions. The discipline has absolutely no value if its presuppositions about the source of the gospels can be shown to be erroneous. RC is only "relevant" for gospel study if the assumptions

⁷ Osborne, 663.

about Markan priority are true. Osborne sees the need to determine priority in the Gospels before any serious study takes place. Acknowledging the significant difference in result of gospel studies if one hold to Matthean priority instead of Markan priority, he notes,

one must make a conclusion of some sort regarding the interrelationship of the Gospels before redactional study can begin, and most scholars have judged the four-document hypothesis to be clearly superior to the others.⁸

However redaction critics do not hold that an accepted “conclusion” regarding the relationship of the Gospels includes a view that the writers were independent upon one another. One gets the impression that RC needs to have a conclusion regarding “priority” before it can function, since its philosophy is based upon the theory that the writers used each other in order to compile. This includes the fact that in the Markan priority viewpoint, Matthew an eyewitness used Mark who was not an eyewitness as the basis for his own account, which included of all things, his call to ministry.

RC also works with the disciplines of FC and TC. RC needs to look at both the original form (FC) and the process at which the final form arrived as we have it today (TC). By studying the final form of the evangelists, redaction critics are then able to speculate as to how and why one author changed, inserted or embellished a particular tradition before him. For instance, in Luke 23:34, 43, 46, Luke records that Jesus uttered three sayings that are not found in any of the other Synoptics. RC seeks to determine which one or all of these sayings might have been added by Luke. Osborne notes that redaction critics “believe that these changes to the tradition provide a clue to the Evangelist’s theological intentions and life situation (*Sitz im Leben*) of his community.”⁹ This view leads some to assume that Osborne holds that Jesus did not utter such words on the cross, but that they were added to the “tradition” (i.e. Mark and possibly Matthew) that possibly developed in the church for a particular theological or homiletical purpose.¹⁰

Redaction critics believe that there are several types of redaction or editing that went on by the evangelists.¹¹ One type of redacting that Matthew and Luke placed upon Mark was actually conservation. They shorted what Mark wrote. An example of this, they claim, is seen in Matthew 9:6 and Luke 5:24 and what they do to Mark 2:10. Here Matthew and Luke shorten Mark by deleting what they must think to be a redundant “I say to you” prior to the injunction to “Rise!” Yet while conservation is an example of RC, so too is expansion. Matthew and Luke’s hallmark propensity to expand the shorter Mark is seen as proof positive that they in fact used Mark as at least one of their sources. Various other

⁸ Ibid., 667.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ cf. Osborne’s review of *The Jesus Crisis* in JETS 42/2 (June 1999) 193-210. He does an excellent job clarifying his position of RC and how the Holy Spirit preserved all the gospel forms as God-breathed.

¹¹ cf. McKnight, 85-87.

elements of RC are conflating of two traditions, transposition, and alteration. An example of conflating two traditions is found in the temptation account, it is argued, where Matthew and Luke start with Mark's short account and add to it *Q*.

What is fascinating of this example, is that if a redaction critic held to Matthean priority, he would simply be saying that what we had in Mark was "conservation" and a type of juxtaposition in Luke, since he flip flops the order of the three temptations!

All these elements of RC are based on the presupposition that the gospel writers were not independent upon each other, but interdependent.

Evaluation

Positively, RC in a general way helps one understand what one author has chosen to omit or highlight about the words and works of Jesus Christ. Perhaps it can play a significant study in the study of gospel harmonies that were one prevalent in New Testament studies but which have fallen prey to historical criticism and its emphasis on editorial license. However it is one thing to omit and highlight but it is another thing altogether to "expand" a source or tradition beyond what actually took place or was said. This is a radical emphasis of RC.

Negatively, RC is built upon the same assumptions as FC and TC. It seems so subjective to build an entire discipline on such presuppositions, knowing that without the reality of such presuppositions, one's entire discipline is flawed and useless.

The types of redacting that RC employs contain no uniform procedure. It is simply a classification of what goes on. With so many types, any parallel passage is bound to fit one category! Sometimes Matthew and Luke conserve, then sometimes they expand, and sometimes they conflate. The entire discipline seems at times a bit too subjective.

One other thing that is troubling about redaction critics is their insistence that the gospel writers were not too interested in actually getting the words of Christ exact. In other words, they often put words in His mouth if the church felt that he said them. They used their editorial license (i.e. style) to record the teaching of Christ. Speaking of the style and license that Gospel writer's possessed, Osborne makes the startling statement that

Here it is important to remember that the Evangelists' concern was not the *ipsisima verba* (exact words) but the *ipsissima vox* (the very voice) of Jesus. They were free to give highly periphrastic renditions to stress one certain aspect.¹²

I would question whether the Evangelists were not concerned about getting the words of Christ exact. I do not consider the fact that Luke uses "plain" and Matthew "mount" for the Sermon given by Christ as an example of the "highly periphrastic renditions" which Osborne emphasizes above. There are far easier ways to deal with the difference of term.

¹² Osborne, 667.

As a whole, I find RC to be a bit of a flawed discipline, built upon highly subjective presuppositions. Osborne admits this to be the basic problem with RD, especially in the area of the setting of the Gospel. He notes, “Subjectivism is especially seen in the speculations regarding *Sitz im Leben*, which are too often based on the assumption that every theological point is addressed to some problem in the community behind the Gospel.”¹³ However, if redaction critics can accept that the final form of the gospels are theopneustos, then I can respect them and listen to what they have to say.

¹³ Ibid.