

Hermeneutics for Synoptic Exegesis

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Introduction

Arriving at a set of hermeneutical guidelines for the exegesis of the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke poses many problems. There is the fact that the three Gospels obviously contain much common material, consist of various kinds of literature, and have an apparent rearranging of material. In addition to these and many other issues related to the Synoptic Gospels, there is the major current debate over the nature of meaning. Even terminology is shifting in meaning. Robert Thomas points out in his article on current hermeneutical trends, definitions of terms in the area of biblical interpretation are changing at an alarming rate.¹

Definition of Hermeneutics

Historically hermeneutics has been defined as the science and art of interpretation. As a discipline, it seeks to determine the meaning that the author intended to communicate in that text. In order to do so, it takes into consideration textual issues, grammatical studies, historical information as well as cultural and social factors which all go in to determining the meaning of a particular passage.

The Synoptic Problem

The Synoptic Problem is far beyond the scope of this paper. The major ramifications of this issue on the hermeneutics for synoptic exegesis are these. New Testament studies on the whole have assumed that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke were dependent upon him and a yet to be discovered “Q” document that served as a second source for the latter two Evangelists.²

This dependence upon at least these two sources forced Matthew and Luke to edit, expand at times, and improve Mark’s treatise, which is considered to be weak both in its competence of Greek and its theological value.³ All this has left some New Testament scholars wondering aloud what words of Jesus the church actually possesses. Some such as Osborne have concluded that what the church today possesses in some cases are not the very words of Christ, but His voice or in other words, “paraphrastic renditions.”⁴

¹ JETS 39/2; 242-249.

² In the same hypothesis (“Oxford”) there is the thought perhaps of a third and fourth source, “M” and “L” for Matthew and Luke respectively.

³ Robert H. Stein, “Synoptic Problem” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 788-790.

⁴ Grant Osborne, “Redaction Criticism” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 667.

Presuppositions

All scholarship begins with some presuppositions, whether they are radical or subtle. This paper begins with several clear assumptions about the hermeneutics for interpreting the Synoptic Gospels.

1. *The text is reliable (both textually and historically)*

a. Textual criticism

This paper assumes that New Testament scholarship possesses in the extant manuscripts all that God intended us to have and that what is Scripture is in fact God-breathed. The Greek text of the Synoptic Gospels is reliable and can be presented as the word of God.

b. Various other methodologies of historical criticism

Source Criticism has already been alluded to above in “The Synoptic Problem.” This discipline can play a part in determining which sources a particular Gospel writer may have used. We know for instance that Luke did use sources. We are not told that they were other gospel writers.⁵ However the significance of source criticism in interpreting a particular passage in a Synoptic Gospel is debated.

Form Criticism may be defined as *that methodological procedure that seeks to determine, based upon existing written gospel sources, what were (are) the underlying oral traditions which were the basis for these written sources.* While this discipline may be helpful in classifying material found in the Synoptic Gospels, the subjective nature of trying to guess at the identity of the oral form for the written source we now possess adds little, I believe, in interpreting the written source that we now possess.

Tradition Criticism looks at the origin, history, and development of a particular passage or saying and its benefit is similar to that of Form Criticism. In reality, it encompasses form and source criticism, taking these disciplines into consideration as it attempts to reconstruct the process by which the written form can be. While there may be a benefit in knowing the process by which a particular saying came to be the final form we now possess, its value for exegesis of a particular passage in the Synoptic Gospels is somewhat skeptical.

Redaction Criticism from the perspective of this writer is potentially the most subjective and damaging of all these critical disciplines. While there seems little doubt that the Synoptic Gospel writers rearranged material from time to time to fit their intended purpose (e.g. Temptation account of Jesus in Matt. 4/Luke 4), it is another thing all together to argue as some redaction critics do that the Evangelists were simply editors who at times even placed words on the lips of Jesus that He never really uttered. In

⁵ cf. Paul Felix in “Literary Dependence and Luke’s Prologue” in *The Jesus Crisis* (271-288). He argues that the tenor of Luke’s passage in 1:1-4 hints at the fact that Luke had what can be best described as a low view of the source material that existed when he chose to compile his own account.

addition, some argue that passages like the Sermon on the Mount/Plain was not given in one sitting but is a compilation of different sayings of Jesus (or what the church said He said) over time.

The bottom line of all this is that while there may be some value in each respective methodology, any one that denies the historical accuracy of the Scripture and the doctrine of inspiration must be rejected.

2. *An author's intended meaning is contained in the text*

Evangelical scholars who argue for the importance of authorial intent in determining meaning have been heavily influenced by E. D. Hirsch and his work, *Validity in Interpretation*. Hirsch argued that meaning resides in what the author intended by the passage, as opposed to what later readers might take it to mean.

Simply stated, authorial intent means the intention of the author as expressed in the text. The emphasis is on what the author "expressed in the text." Authorial intent does not mean what the author "planned" in his mind, what he "purposed" to write, or what he "thought in his mind." We cannot know these matters. It is the writings that are inspired, not the thoughts in the author's mind. Authorial intent can only be determined from the text itself. This is really at the heart of hermeneutical discussion today.

Authorial intent assumes that the writers were conscious of what they wrote. In other words, they understood the meaning of what they were saying. This must be true, since if they did not, then one cannot expect their readers to have understood them. They were determined to communicate their intended meaning and they did so by using words in relation to other words that would carry out their intention.

3. *The meaning of a passage in a given particular synoptic gospel can be derived apart from either of the other two synoptic gospels*

If meaning truly rests in what the author communicated in the text and not in the community of readers, then to correctly interpret what a given gospel writer wrote in the text can be found in that text alone and not in another gospel writer. For example, when Mark's readers first heard his gospel read, they did not first need to go and hear what Matthew's gospel had said (assuming Matthean priority) or wait for Matthew to be written (assuming Markan priority). The meaning of their text was contained in their text.

This does not mean that today we cannot use a synoptic writer to clear up what might be confusing to us today, since time has created some bridges that do in fact need to be gapped. For instance, when Luke records in 14:26 that Jesus taught that His followers need to "hate one's parents" we observe from Matthew 10:37-38 that His disciples really need to simply love Him more than their parents. What was clear to them needs clarification for us. This need not open the debate as to which of the two expressions did Jesus really utter. This is because potentially both can be true. He may have said them both Himself, with each of the Evangelist's choosing to cite one over the other. However

the prevailing view among evangelical New Testament scholars is that what Jesus may have spoken (i.e. perhaps even in Aramaic) is preserved in the respective Gospels by the inspiration of the text given by the Holy Spirit.⁶ He has accurately preserved the voice or meaning of Jesus.

Methodology for Synoptic Hermeneutics

With these introductory matters considered, it is now possible to summarize a procedure for interpreting the Synoptic Gospels. Any approach of the study of the Scriptures must begin with the investigation of certain preliminary issues. For instance, a thorough study of the gospel of Matthew must contain evidence, (if possible) about the author, date, background and setting of the gospel, audience, and the occasion for the writing. Matters such as these are derived from both external and internal sources. A good starting point for much of this information is a well-respected New Testament Introduction.⁷

Once as much background information can be collected, the text should be studied along the areas of textual and grammatical issues. The goal of textual analysis is to be certain that one is using as close to the original text as possible. The area of grammatical analysis seeks to observe relationships in the text between words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Here word analysis can play a helpful part in certain cases. Assuming that the text is reliable, that the history of the passage is dependable, and that what the author intended to communicate is contained in the text, the student is now able to begin to lead out of the text the author's intended meaning. The interpreter will also need to observe the genre of a particular passage and realize the nature and purpose of that particular form of literature (e.g. parable, proverb, pronouncement stories, narrative, apocalyptic, etc....).

The use of historical-critical methodologies can play a part in the process of determining the author's intended meaning. Redaction Criticism may allow the interpreter to determine the bent of the particular evangelist by alerting him/her to material that was included, omitted, or expanded. In addition, Literary Criticism can help the exegete understand the part from the whole. This discipline is not particularly interested in the tradition of the text but works with the final form. Often times seeing the larger picture of how a gospel is arranged structurally helps the interpreter to more carefully and accurately understand a given pericope.

Conclusion

The study of the Synoptic Gospels is a rich and rewarding study, but it contains some challenges for the interpreter. It is a fact that all approaches to the study of the Scripture contain some presuppositions. The evangelical New Testament scholar begins with the assumption that God has communicated His revelation in His word and that He Himself

⁶ cf. Grant Osborne, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical." JETS 42/2 (June 1999), 208.

⁷ e.g. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3d ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1970); D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

insured the accuracy of His word by the power of the Holy Spirit through the doctrine of inspiration. In addition, the meaning that God desired to communicate is contained in His word and that this meaning can be determined by those to whom He revealed this truth. The task of the exegete is to lead out the meaning of the text through an exhaustive analysis of the text, taking into consideration the various genres and literary devices used to communicate this meaning.