Form Criticism

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Resymé:

This method of analysis focuses on the individual, self-contained units of material into which the Gospels may be subdivided. It identifies different «forms» or subgenres of literature which appear, and it attempts to describe the ways in which these forms developed during the period of time in which they were passed along by word of mouth prior to the writing of the Gospels themselves.

1. The Method
2. Critique
3. Alternatives
4. Criteria of Authenticity

1. The Method

1.1. Organs

At the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars such as H. Gunkel and J. Wellhausen had already developed form criticism for many portions of the OT. In NT studies source criticism still captured the attention of most. By 1920, however, a trio of German scholars was busily researching the oral prehistory of the Gospels. K. L. Schmidt, M. Dibelius and most notably R. Bultmann pioneered the form criticism of the NT. English-speaking circles were at first relatively skeptical of this new discipline, but by the 1930s and 1940s in Great Britain, V. Taylor and R. H. Lightfoot were cautiously appropriating and advocating many form-critical principles in their work.

The earliest form critics based their study on several foundational presuppositions. All agreed that the teachings of Jesus and the narratives about his life which comprise the Gospels were transmitted orally over a considerable period of time before they were ever written down. They believed that these units of material for the most part circulated independently of one another. They affirmed that the closest parallels to the transmission of the gospel tradition could be found in the oral, folk literature of other ancient, European cultures (ranging as far afield as Iceland and Yugoslavia). They concluded that comparison with these parallels made it highly likely that the final form in which the Gospels appeared could not be trusted to supply a reliable account of what Jesus actually said and did. Rather one had to work backward and remove various accretions and embellishments which had crept into the tradition and so try to recover the original, pure forms. These forms, they believed, were originally short, streamlined and unadorned, and very Jewish in style and milieu.

1.2. Objectives

The original form-critical agenda included three main tasks: classifying the individual pericopes (self-contained units of teaching or narrative) according to form, assigning each form to a *Sitz im Leben* («life-situation») in the early church and reconstructing the history of the tradition *(see* Tradition Criticism).

1.2.1. Analysis of Forms

No universally agreed-upon list of forms exists. At least six major categories appear quite frequently. The first four focus primarily on Jesus' teachings; the last two on the narrative material.

Individual logia, or sayings
These include wisdom or proverbial sayings (e.g., Mt 8:20), prophetic and apocalyptic utterances (e.g., Lk 12:54-56), legal sayings and church rules (e.g., Mk 7:6-8), including what are often called «sentences of holy law» (e.g., Mt 18 15-17) and «I-sayings» (e.g., Mt 12:27-28), in which Jesus reveals something about his own identity or mission.

Pronouncement stories
These have also been called apophthegms and paradigms. They are short stories about an action of Jesus whose primary purpose is to lead up to a climactic pronouncement on a given topic (e.g., Mk 2:13-17; 3:31-35; 12:13-17). They are related to the Hellenistic chreiai--pithy summaries of the actions and teachings of a great figure designed to epitomize some important attribute of that individual. Though given only scant attention in most traditional form criticism, chreia studies have proliferated in recent years. Many pronouncement stories are also conflict or controversy stories, pitting Jesus against his opponents on a crucial topic which divided them.

Parables
These are short, metaphorical narratives, usually fictitious, designed to reveal some aspect of the kingdom of God. Form critics have regularly subdivided them into similitudes (explicit, present tense comparisons-- e.g., Mk 4:30-32), parables proper (past-tense stories--e.g., Mt25:1-13) and examplestories (narratives built

on metonymy rather than metaphor--e.g., Lk 12:16-21). In this century parables have usually been sharply distinguished from allegory, but this distinction is coming under increasing attack.

Speeches

These are longer, connected utterances of Jesus, usually believed to have been constructed out of shorter forms which once circulated independently of each other (e.g., Mt 5--7; Mk 4:1-34; 13:5-37). Speeches may in turn be subdivided into various other categories (e.g., farewell addresses Jn 14--17, or symposia, Luke 14:1-24.

Miracle Stories

These are narratives of the supernatural deeds of Jesus. They divide into two main categories--healing miracles and nature miracles. These may then be subdivided into categories such as reanimations (Lk 7:11-17) or exorcisms (Mk 5:1-20) and rescue miracles (Mk 4:35-41) or gift miracles (In 2:1-11).

Other Historical Narratives

Many of these have often been labeled legends or myths, partly because of their content (associating Jesus with God in some way) and partly because not all of each narrative is believed to be historically trustworthy (e.g., Lk 2:1-20; Mt 4:1-11; Mk 16:1-8).

1.2.2. Use in the Early Church

The form critic next tries to determine in which contexts in the life of the early Christian community each of these forms would have been most valued. For example, it is widely accepted that pronouncement stories would have been most used in popular preaching. Miracle stories were probably most significant in Christian apologetic against Greco-Roman beliefs in other divine men or primeval heroes. Legends, it is often maintained, were created primarily out of a desire to glorify and exalt Jesus. Sentences of holy law were probably most relevant in settling church disputes. Parables may well have been transmitted during times of popular storytelling. Many forms are not readily associated with just one *Sitz im Leben,* and most critics agree that this objective is the most speculative of the three.

1.2.3. Writing the Tradition-History

Finally, each form is studied in light of what kinds of changes it most likely underwent during the transmission of the oral tradition. For example, it is usually affirmed that the bulk of the parables was well preserved, but introductions and conclusions were commonly altered as they were applied to new contexts. The pronouncement stories carefully preserved the pronouncements (comparable to the punch line of a joke), but the historical trappings in which they were encased might be altered greatly. Legends usually formed around a historical kernel which was then significantly embellished. Prophetic sayings (and various other forms) were often first spoken by early Christian prophets in the name of the risen Lord and later read back onto the lips of the earthly Jesus.

Form critics also believe that various tendencies of the developing tradition were widely applicable, irrespective of the given form of a pericope. Most of these can be summarized under what Bultmann termed «the law of increasing distinctness»: stories became longer, incidental details were added, nameless characters were identified and place names were included. Additional dialog, interpretation, expansion and contemporization all appeared. Reapplication from a Palestinian-Jewish to a Hellenistic-Jewish and eventually to a Hellenistic-Gentile context also greatly transformed the form and content of much of the tradition.

2. Critique

From the outset of the discipline there were conservative scholars who questioned many of the form critics' conclusions. But for a majority of scholars representing a wide spectrum of theological traditions, form criticism became the single most important modern tool for Gospel analysis. In the 1950s redaction

criticism developed, which has in many ways superseded form criticism during the last thirty years. But most redaction critics, like Gospel scholars specializing in other disciplines, have presupposed most of the methodology and conclusions of formcriticism even when they have devoted much of their attention to other questions. In recent years, however, many NT scholars are utilizing forms of literary criticism point to the carefully wrought unity of the Gospel narratives and calling into question many of the older axioms of traditio-historical development. Each of the three main objectives on the form-critical agenda therefore deserves careful evaluation.

2.1. Analysis of Forms

2.1.1. Aids to Interpretation

Form criticism can provide guidelines to interpreting individual pericopes. This objective is probably the most significant and manageable of the three. The Gospels are not monolithic narratives; each section cannot be treated like every other. Interpretation is genre-bound, that is, there are often distinct hermeneutical rules for distinct literary forms. Recognizing that the emphasis in a pronouncement story is on the pronouncement helps the interpreter to avoid stressing peripheral details. For example, the focus of Mark 3:31-35 is not on Jesus' apparent neglect of his family but on his embracing his followers as part of his family. This approach also reveals how often Jesus' pronouncements focused on the radical newness of the kingdom *vis-à-vis* the prevailing forms of Judaism of the day (e.g., Mk 2:23-28).

Recent form criticism of the miracle stories has demonstrated how they usually focus on christology and the kingdom--demonstrating who Jesus was and what was the nature of the new society he envisioned. Thus the cursing of the fig tree (Mk 11:12-14, 20-25) was no petulant outburst, nor even primarily a lesson about faith, but a symbolic demonstration of God's impending judgment on Israel (comparable to the cleansing of the Temple around which Mark sandwiches this miracle-story--see w. 15-19). So too Jesus' walking on the water (Mk 6:45-52) was neither a convenient way to get across the lake nor an arbitrary demonstration of his gravitydefying power but a revelation of himself as the Lord of the wind and waves (cf. Ps 107:23-32) and the very «I am» (Yahweh) of Exodus 3:14.

Parable research has probably benefitted the most from form criticism. Only about half of the passages in the Gospels usually called parables are specifically labeled as such by the Evangelists. Sometimes those, which are not so labeled, are treated differently. For example, the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19 31) has often been viewed as a true story, or at least as giving an accurate description of the afterlife.

In light of the structural parallels between this passage and many which are explicitly labeled parallels, both of these views are doubtful. One dare not derive doctrine from the details of a parable unless it can be corroborated by less metaphorical teachings elsewhere in Scripture.

2.1.2. Keys to Gospel Outlines

Classification of the Gospel pericopes by form also enables one to discern the types of structures and outlines which the four Evangelists used. Sometimes they arrange material in chronological order, sometimes in topical order. In several instances they seem to have grouped a series of like forms together. Thus Mark 2:1--3:6 collects together a group of pronouncement stories; 4:35-- 6:6a comprises a collection of miracles (as does most of Mt 8--9); and Matthew 13:1-52 is made up primarily of parable (as is most of Luke 14--16).

2.1.3. Ambiguities

Many passages, however, do not easily fall into one of the primary form-critical categories. Many seem to mix together several forms. For example, Mark 2:1-12 shares features of both a healing miracle and a pronouncement story. Early form critics usually assumed that mixed forms had undergone more

complex development and that their historical kernel was therefore less recoverable. But in the ancient world students of rhetoric regularly claimed that mixed forms were aesthetically pleasing (e.g., Quintillian *Inst. Orat.* 8.6.4.9), so it is likely that many such forms appeared right at the start of the Gospel tradition. Other formcritical categories seem to combine form and content. An example-story is largely indistinguishable from a parable in form; so too a myth and a historical narrative. Interpretive presuppositions unrelated to pure literary form seem to have influenced several of the form critics' classifications.

2.2. Use in the Early Church

In principle the attempt to assign a *Sitz im Leben* to each form is well motivated and potentially helpful. If one can discern how the early church used a certain aspect of the Gospel tradition, one may better understand in what contexts today it may be most useful. Occasionally comparative data permit reasonable inferences; Paul's knowledge of Jesus' «words of institution» (I Cor 11:23-25) suggests that part or all of the story of the Last Supper (Lk 22:13-38) may have been read or recited during celebrations of the Eucharist, much as it often is today. But in most cases such reconstructions are highly speculative because they are based on what other ancient cultures did in settings that are not always closely parallel to the rise of Christianity.

2.3. Writing the Tradition-History

This objective has perhaps been the focus of the greatest amount of scholarly energy, but it is also laden with the most pitfalls. Most scholars have recognized some of these pitfalls, but few have appreciated their cumulative effect in casting serious doubt on all hypotheses of the development of the tradition which assume that primitive forms underwent substantial modification prior to their inclusion in the written texts of the Gospels.

2.3.1. Tendencies of the Tradition

Several considerations challenge the widely held notion that stories of what Jesus did and said would have been significantly distorted during the period of oral tradition (see section 1.2.3.).

1. Probably little more than twenty years elapsed between the events described and the first written accounts (c. AD 30-50). Eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry, including hostile ones, could easily have refuted and discredited Christian claims during this period if those claims had been in any way mistaken.
2. From the outset Jesus' disciples may well have kept private, written notes along the lines of those kept by other rabbis and disciples. And the fact that they were sent out to preach about Jesus and his message during his lifetime (Mk 6:7-13; Lk 10:1-16) suggests that they would have begun to preserve the tradition early on.
3. The so-called law of increasing distinctness is extremely misleading. Detailed analyses of the oral traditions of the cultures closest in time and space to ancient Israel, coupled with a comprehensive comparison of Mark with Matthew and Luke, later apocryphal traditions, sayings in the church fathers and textual variants show that no consistent patterns of lengthening or abbreviation prevail. If anything, a slight tendency toward decreasing distinctness occurs with longer forms such as parables, miracle stories and other historical narratives.

Several additional «tendencies» of the tradition prove equally suspect. The various Gospel pericopes probably did not circulate in as much isolation from one another as has often been assumed. For example, the OT, intertestamental literature and rabbinic material demonstrate that parables and other stories often concluded with aphoristic generalizations. These may well have been pan of Jesus' teaching from the outset rather than free-floating sayings which were attached at a later date. Some of the speeches in the Gospels may be compilations of shorter teachings from discrete settings, but most ancient historians and

biographers tended to digest and excerpt longer wholes in writing their speeches and narratives. The same may well have occurred for passages like the Sermon on the Mount or the Olivet Discourse.

2.3.2. The Delay of the Parousia

Many of the additions to the Gospel tradition postulated by form critics reflect ongoing concerns for church life and behavior. It is often assumed that the earliest *kerygma* («proclamation») had no interest in ethical mandates, establishment of church order or teachings about an extended interval between Christ's first and second comings. Form critics usually so stress Jesus' teaching about his imminent return that any details which point to the delay of the Parousia are assumed to be secondary additions to the tradition.

But it is not at all clear that Jesus' teaching was so one-sided or that the early church would have had to modify the tradition in any substantial way as it became increasingly apparent that Christ was not returning as quickly as some might have hoped. After all, the Jews had heard for centuries during the prophetic era that «the Day of the Lord» was «at hand» (e.g., Joel 2:1; Obad 15; Hab 2:3), and yet they had come to grips with the fact that «soon» in God's timing often does not correspond to human expectation. Psalm 90:4 became an influential text both in rabbinic Judaism (cf. *2 Apoc. Bar.* 48:12-13; *Pirqe R El.* 28) and in early Christianity (2 Pet 3:8-9).

2.3.3. Early Christian Prophecy

The view that the early church failed to distinguish sayings of early Christian prophets from teachings of the historical Jesus must almost certainly be laid to rest (Aune). The evidence on which this hypothesis was originally based was meager enough; more careful, recent studies have shown that it is virtually non-existent.

The closest parallels come from the practices of certain Greco-Roman prophets speaking in the name of mythological gods, especially at oracles or temples of healing. The only NT example which records words of the ascended Lord spoken directly to his people appears in a context (Rev 2:1-3:22) where he is clearly distinguished from the earthly Jesus. The only examples in the NT of the words of Christian prophets (Acts 11:28; 21:10-11) clearly attribute the Lord's message to a human speaker--Agabus. And in I Corinthians 14:29 Paul makes it clear that no prophecy could be accepted that did not conform to the previously revealed Word of God, so even if some sayings crept into the tradition from certain prophets, they would not likely have distorted the original gospel message as is often alleged. The lack of sayings attributed to Jesus on topics of later church controversy (e.g., circumcision or speaking in tongues) further supports the view that Christian prophecy was not confused with the teachings of the historical Jesus.

3. Alternatives

The lasting legacy of form criticism has been its concern for studying the period of the oral transmission of the Gospel tradition, even if many of its conclusions about that period should be rejected. But two recent schools of thought have proposed alternative models of oral transmission that prove more promising Each maintains that the early church would have preserved the various units of tradition more carefully than classic form criticism granted. A third approach abandons virtually all attempts to analyze the oral tradition.

3.1. The Guarded Hypothesis

In the late 1950s and early 1960s two Swedish scholars, H. Riesenfeld and B. Gerhardsson, proposed that Jesus had his disciples memorize his most significant teachings and even certain narratives about what he did. Other ancient Jewish rabbis followed these practices, and memories were cultivated so as to produce prodigious feats of recall--such as memorizing the entire Hebrew Bible. The twelve disciples were viewed as an authoritative circle of leadership which carefully safeguarded the traditions. Paul seems to

point to the existence of such a guarded tradition when he speaks of passing on what had been delivered to him (e.g., I Cor 11:23; 15:3).

Reaction to this approach was at first largely negative. Other scholars pointed out that Jesus was not simply an ordinary rabbi, that the rabbinic evidence was from later than the first century, that there was scant evidence in the Gospels themselves of any concern to preserve Jesus' teaching and that the numerous differences among Gospel parallels precluded any significant amount of memorization. More recently, however, R. Riesner has advanced the discussion further. In a wide-ranging study of educational practices common to first-century Israel and its neighbors, he concludes that at least six additional arguments support the view that Jesus' followers would have carefully preserved accurate information about him without necessarily memorizing it word-for-word:

1. Jesus' words were received as being on a par with those of the prophets, which are among the portions of the OT usually held to be the most historically reliable.
2. Expectations about the Messiah included seeing him as a teacher of wisdom, whose words should be safeguarded.
3. Over ninety per cent of Jesus' sayings are couched in quasi-poetic form which would have been easy to remember.
4. Like other rabbis, Jesus seems to have encouraged the practice of memorization before meditation or application (e.g., Mk 9:10; 13:28; Lk 11:1).
5. Mandatory elementary education for boys until about the age of twelve (such as Jesus' disciples would have received) almost exclusively involved rote memorization.
6. Almost all teachers in both Greco-Roman and Jewish circles gathered disciples around them to perpetuate their teachings and lifestyle, so however different Jesus was from the rabbis in other ways, he probably resembled them in this respect.

3.2. Flexible Transmission within Fixed Limits

A second alternative to classic form criticism offers a less conservative paradigm for the transmission of the tradition than the memorization hypothesis. Recent studies of oral folklore and sacred history in pre-literate cultures, especially by the anthropologist A. Lord, have shown that epic stories of up to 100,000 words in length were often memorized by specially designated storytellers or folk singers. The plot, characters, main events and a sizable number of the details remained constant every time the stories were retold or sung. Members of the community were sufficiently familiar with them to correct the singer if he erred in any crucial way. Yet anywhere from ten to forty per cent of the precise wording could vary from one performance to the next, quite like the variation found in the Synoptic Gospels. Lord has suggested that much of these Gospel narratives may reflect the product of a succession of oral performances of the stories they recount. Studies of the Jewish targums (Aramaic paraphrases of OT texts with explanatory elaborations) from the first centuries of the Common Era suggest that something similar to what Lord has envisioned was practiced in Jewish circles. As a result a growing number of Gospel specialists are adopting more and more of the methods of this newest alternative to form criticism.

W. Kelber has applied Lord's studies to the Gospels and has emphasized the disjunction between orality and literacy. Before traditions are written down in a fixed form, there is no single identifiable, canonical form of any tradition. Each oral performance is somewhat different and not necessarily any further from or closer to the words of the original speaker. It is therefore impossible to recover the earliest form of a Gospel pericope; at best one can speak of an «originating structure». Kelber also pits the written Gospels against the earlier, unwritten forms as the product of a segment of the Christian community which was challenging the authority of the apostles as the guardians of the oral tradition. He sees the textuality of the Gospels as creating a more rigid, fixed way of telling the story of Jesus than was permitted by oral tradition. Although traces of orality still appear in the Gospels, especially Mark, the value of classic form criticism is greatly diminished for this approach.

Yet it appears that in several respects this line of interpretation has relied on too one-sided an appropriation of cultural anthropology. Other studies show that the disjunction between orality and literacy

need not be as marked or that cultures may prefer written or unwritten forms for various ideological reasons unrelated to accuracy of preservation. What is more, oral traditions continued to circulate alongside the written texts until at least the mid-second century and were sometimes even preferred by early Christians as more trustworthy. And a more careful investigation of the written traditions of the Gospels (especially variants among manuscripts, canonical parallels and second-century quotations of the Gospels) shows that Kelber has also exaggerated the rigidity of textuality. Study of the oral pre-history of the Gospel traditions therefore remains a crucial prelude to understanding their canonical forms.

3.3. Rhetorical Analysis

K. Berger has recently compiled the most comprehensive treatment of Gospel forms since Bultmann (and goes beyond him by analyzing texts found in all parts of the NT). Unlike most of his predecessors, Berger limits himself almost entirely to classifying forms and identifying their function, believing the reconstruction of any oral prehistory to be beyond the reach of modern scholars, given the limited data available to them. Against W. Schmithals he agrees that there often was a period of oral transmission, and with many conservatives he believes that many traditions were reasonably well preserved. But he affirms that it is usually not possible to move from what is probably true about a group of texts in general to what is likely for any individual passage or form. Berger therefore rejects the comparative-religions approach which seeks analogies in other oral traditions of antiquity. Instead, he focuses exclusively on parallel forms and genres in written texts from the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds.

Berger's volume falls into four sections. The last three follow, in turn, the three categories of rhetoric most commonly discussed by ancient philosophers: deliberative (or exhortational), epideictic (laudatory or condemnatory) and juridical (or apologetic). The first main section discusses forms which could function in more than one of these three kinds of rhetoric. They include analogical and metaphorical texts, simple statements, speeches, chreia and apophthegms and argumentation.

Under deliberative genres Berger deals with virtue and vice lists, community rules, paraenesis (exhortation), domestic codes, beatitudes, warnings, proverbs and related forms.

As examples of epideictic rhetoric he considers various kinds of lists and catalogs meant to praise or blame, acclamations and doxologies, narrative commentary, reports of martyrdom, symbolic actions, travel narratives, summary statements, miracle stories, hymns and prayers, proclamations, apocalyptic, etiologies, liturgy, encomium, dialog and so on.

As examples of judicial rhetoric Berger examines sayings on holiness or impurity, verdicts and criticisms, eyewitness reports, accusations and apologies.

Berger's use of the ancient threefold division of rhetoric has been widely adopted in recent NT genre criticism, especially of the epistles. Its value for assessing the function of a written text as a whole is undisputed. Its application in analyzing subgenres or forms which are the products of oral tradition (as particularly found in the Gospels) is less clear. Significantly, Berger's first section, which studies forms used in more than one kind of rhetoric, focuses much more on the Gospels than do his other three sections. Here his discussions read much like a summary of the state of the art of more traditional form criticism. Nor is it obvious that the study of the pre-history of Gospel forms should be so totally abandoned. Granted that one must proceed with great caution in an area this susceptible to speculation, the recent alternatives to classic form criticism discussed above suggest that progress can be made in the study of the oral transmission of the Gospel traditions. How this is accomplished for individual passages or forms comprises the next topic of discussion.

4. Criteria of Authenticity

For many form critics their most significant task has been to assess the authenticity of the discrete units of Gospel tradition. For some, more authority attaches to those portions which reflect Jesus' *ipsissima*

verba (very own words) or *ipsissima vox* (very own voice) than to less carefully preserved forms. For others, historical reliability and theological value are entirely separate issues. Either way, numerous criteria have been developed to help form critics sift the more authentic from the less authentic.

4.1. The Individual Criteria

Four principal criteria have been almost universally accepted. (1) The criterion of dissimilarity states that any teaching or action of Jesus which distinguishes him both from the Judaism of his day and from the early Christian church may be accepted as authentic. (2) The criterion of multiple attestation places more confidence in those details which are found in more than one Gospel source (e.g., Mk, Q, M, L, Jn) or in more than one form. (3) The criterion of Palestinian environment or language more readily accepts that which is very Semitic in style or background. (4) The criterion of coherence includes texts which fit well with material already authenticated by one of the other three criteria.

4.2. Critique

A distinction must be made between the positive and negative use of these criteria. Most form critics have assumed that material which could not be authenticated by one of these means must therefore be inauthentic. But this does not follow. The dissimilarity criterion can demonstrate only what is distinctive about Jesus; what he shared with his contemporaries definition fail the test. Multiple attestation does increase the confidence one can place in a tradition, but singly attested material may prove equally genuine. The intermingling of Semitic and Hellenistic cultures in the first century makes the third criterion very difficult to apply; it is hard to maintain that a Semitic form or style could not have been created in early Christianity or that Jesus could not have utilized Greco-Roman concepts and forms of speech. Coherence is a very subjective concept. Presumably all of the Gospel material cohered in the minds of the Evangelists; how is any modern scholar to say that apparent inconsistencies are sharp enough to call into question the truthfulness of the accounts?

Beyond these specific criticisms, a major presupposition behind the use of the criteria of authenticity must be called into question. The entire undertaking is usually predicated on the assumption that the Gospel traditions are inherently suspect unless good reasons can be advanced for accepting them. Actually, there are excellent reasons for believing large sew ments of the Gospels to be historically reliable (totally apart from any presuppositions about the inspiration of Scripture), so that a more positive approach must be adopted. The burden of proof must rest with the skeptic who would doubt any portion of the Gospels. Instead of utilizing criteria of authenticity, one ought to assume authenticity and then ask if there are good reasons for denying it (e.g., irreconcilably contradictory accounts). Problems should then be examined one by one and judgments rendered.

4.3. Application

Nevertheless, even for those who adopt a stance of methodical doubt, the criteria may be used to authenticate many key themes and aspects of the Gospel tradition (though it is usually not recognized to what extent this is true). Jesus' parables are widely held to be authentic; almost no early Christians used the form, while rabbinic parallels almost entirely elucidated Scripture rather than revealing the in-breaking kingdom of God. Key teachings about the kingdom, especially those in which Jesus makes plain that it has arrived (e.g., Mt 12:28) or those which balance present and future hope (e.g., Mk 8:34-38) are similarly distinctive. Other items which pass the dissimilarity test include Jesus' compassion for the outcasts of society, his frequent conflicts with the Jewish authorities over the interpretation of the Law, especially the Sabbath regulations, and his stringent demands for discipleship (e.g., Mt 8:21-22; Lk 14:26; Mk 10:21).

Another major section of Gospel pericopes includes Jesus' teachings about the Son of man. This term was rarely used in Judaism and never appears on the lips of any other NT speaker except Stephen (Acts 7:56). Although it is widely debated, the background for the title is most likely Daniel 7:13, and it probably should be taken as messianic. But it was ambiguous enough that Jesus could invest it with his own meaning

and not risk the nationalistic misinterpretations of his role that more widely used titles like Messiah might have invoked. Jesus' intimate relationship with his Father is another feature of the Gospels widely accepted as authentic. But by the criterion of coherence it is only a small step from this to the use of the title Son of God as equally authentic (texts like Mt 11:27 may form the bridge).

Illustrations could be multiplied. The significance of most of Jesus' miracles closely ties in with his authentic kingdom teachings. Jesus' predictions about establishing his church (Mt 16:18; 18:17), widely believed to be inauthentic, in fact can be authenticated by a criterion of «necessary explanation». Some kind of promises of this nature must have formed the foundation for Peter's remarkable recovery from his denial to his leadership of the church at Pentecost. R. Latourelle has maintained that the application of the various criteria can eventually lead to the authentication of Jesus' baptism, temptation, Transfiguration, call to repentance, Beatitudes, passion, crucifixion and resurrection, commissioning of the apostles and numerous other details in addition to all of those already mentioned. R. Gruenler has shown that even if one accepts only a handful of Jesus' sayings as authentic (as in the largely skeptical studies of N. Perrin), the uniquely authoritative and self-referential claims implied enable one by the criterion of coherence to validate large numbers of more explicitly christological texts.

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