

# Redaction Criticism

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- 1. The Process of Redactional Inquiry
- 2. The Origins of Redaction Criticism
- 3. The Methodology of Redaction Criticism
  - 3.1. Tradition-Critical Analysis
  - 3.2 Form-Critical Analysis
  - 3.3. Redaction-Critical Analysis
    - 3.3.1. Individual Analysis
    - 3.3.2. Holistic Analysis
  - 3.4. Composition-Critical Analysis
    - 3.4.1. The Structure
    - 3.4.2. Intertextual Development
    - 3.4.3. Plot
    - 3.4.4. Setting and Style
- 4. The Weaknesses of Redaction Criticism
- 5. The Place and value of Redaction Criticism
- Bibliography

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Redaction criticism 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. The purpose of this approach is to recover the author's theology and setting. Redaction criticism is the third of four «schools» of criticism developed in this century to study the Gospels and other biblical narratives: *Form criticism*, which seeks the original or authentic tradition behind the final form found in the Gospels but tends to assume that the Evangelists were mere scissors-and-paste editors who artificially strung together the traditions they inherited; tradition criticism, a stepchild of form criticism, which tries to reconstruct the history or develop merit of the Gospel traditions from the earliest to the final form in the Gospels but often ignores the contribution of the Evangelists; and *literary criticism*, which bypasses the historical dimension and studies only the final form of the text, assuming that the value of the Gospels is to be found apart from considerations of originating event or author. Redaction criticism originally developed as a corrective to areas of neglect in form and tradition criticism, but it functions also as a corrective to excesses in literary criticism.

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2. The Origins of Redaction Criticism
3. The Methodology of Redaction Criticism
4. The Weaknesses of Redaction Criticism
5. The Place and value of Redaction Criticism

## 1. The Process of Redactional Inquiry

Redaction criticism must build upon the results of source criticism, for the final results are determined in part by one's choice of Markan or Matthean priority. The most widely held hypothesis remains the Oxford, or four-document, hypothesis of B. H. Streeter, who taught that Matthew and Luke utilized two primary sources, Mark and Q, along with their own secondary sources (M and L). Redaction critics begin with this assumption and study the alterations which the Evangelists made to their sources. This means that 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).

Redaction critics work also with the results of form and tradition criticism, assuming the process of tradition development but studying primarily the final stage, the changes wrought by the Evangelists themselves. When examining Luke's redaction of the crucifixion narrative, these scholars ask which of the three «last sayings» peculiar to Luke (23:34, 43, 46) may have been added earlier by the community and which were added by the Evangelist. They believe that these changes to the tradition provide a clue to the Evangelist's theological intentions and the life-situation (*Sitz im Leben*) of his community.

This is accomplished by asking *why* the changes were made and by seeking consistent patterns in the alterations made by the redactor. Such modifications denote redactional interests or theological tendencies on the part of the Evangelist who introduced them. In Luke's crucifixion narrative two such tendencies might be noted: a christological stress on Jesus as the innocent righteous martyr (exemplified also in Lk 23:47, «Surely this man was righteous *dikaios*») and an emphasis on the crucifixion as a scene of worship (seen in the absence of negative aspects like the earthquake, in the redaction of the taunts which in Luke are contrasted with Jesus' prayer for forgiveness, and in the fact that two of the sayings are prayers).

Finally, the setting or situation of the Lukan church is reconstructed by asking what led to these changes.

This is of course a speculative enterprise, but most critics believe that sociological factors hinted at in the text were behind the pastoral concerns which determined the final form. Thus redaction criticism is interested in both the theological interests and the ecclesiastical situation behind the Gospel texts.

## 2. The Origins of Redaction Criticism

There were several precursors to this movement, such as W. Wrede's «messianic secret»; N. B. Stonehouse's study of christological emphases in the Synoptic Gospels; R. H. Lightfoot's Bampton lectures of 1934, which studied Mark's theological treatment of his sources; or K. L. Schmidt's form-critical treatment of the Markan seams. Like the origins of form criticism via three German scholars working independently in post-World-War-I Germany (Schmidt, Dibelius, Bultmann), redaction criticism began in post-World-War2 Germany with three independent works--those of Bornkamm, Conzelmann and Marxsen.

G. Bornkamm launched the movement with his 1948 article, «The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew», later combined with articles by two of his students in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*. He argued that Matthew not only changed but reinterpreted Mark's miracle story into a paradigm of discipleship centering on the «little faith» of the disciples as a metaphor for the difficult journey of the «little ship of the church.» In a 1954 article, «Matthew As Interpreter of the Words of the Lord» (expanded to «End-Expectation and Church in Matthew» and included in the volume mentioned above) Bornkamm considered Matthew's Gospel as a whole, stating that for Matthew eschatology is the basis for ecclesiology: the church defines itself and its mission in terms of the coming judgments.

N. Perrin states, «If Günther Bornkamm is the first of the true redaction critics, Hans Conzelmann is certainly the most important» (28). Conzelmann's study of Luke began with a 1952 article, «Zur Lukasanalyse», later expanded into *The Theology of St. Luke* (1954). He challenged the prevalent view by arguing that Luke was a theologian rather than a historian; the delay of the Parousia led Luke to replace the imminent eschatology of Mark with a salvation-historical perspective having three stages--the time of Israel, ending with John the Baptist; the time of Jesus (the «center of time», the original German book title); and the time of the church. According to Conzelmann the kingdom in Luke has become virtually a timeless entity, with the Parousia no longer the focus. Mark's brief interim has become an indefinite period, and the church is prepared for prolonged conflict in the lengthy period before the final judgment.

W. Marxsen in his *Mark the Evangelist* (1956) was the first to use the term *Redaktionsgeschichte*, and the first and most influential portion of his work described the differences between form and redaction criticism, asserting that form-critical research has missed the third *Sitz im Leben* (after the situations of Jesus and the early church), namely that of the Evangelist. His method is called «backwards exegesis», which interprets each pericope from the perspective of those preceding it. By this theory Mark used the

John the Baptist story not to tell what happened but rather to provide a base for what came after, the story of Jesus. Marxsen's actual theory regarding Mark was much less influential; he stated that Mark wrote to tell the church to flee the terrible persecution during the Jewish war of AD 66 and to proceed to Galilee where the imminent return of the Son of man (Parousia) would take place.

### 3. The Methodology of Redaction Criticism

The difficulty in redactional research is determining with some degree of probability that a redactional nuance is present in the text. The discipline is prone to highly speculative theories because the methodology as well as the thoroughness of the search completely determines the results. Marxsen, on the one hand, makes Mark a Jewish-Christian work centering on an imminent Parousia, while Weeden, on the other hand, turns Mark into a Hellenistic work countering a «divine man» heresy by recasting Mark's battle with his opponents in the form of a dramatic conflict between Jesus (= Mark) and his disciples (= Mark's opponents). Few interpreters have followed either theory because both failed to consider all the evidence. The key to redactional study is a good synopsis of the Gospels, which becomes the basis for the research. A scholar compares the Gospel accounts, compiles the differences and then studies the resultant data by means of the following stages of analysis.

#### 3.1. Tradition-Critical Analysis

The historical development of the pericope from Jesus through the early church to the Evangelist is determined by applying the criteria of authenticity to the passage:

1. *Dissimilarity* (the tradition is authentic if it exhibits no ties to Judaism or the church);
2. *multiple attestation* (the pericope is repeated in several of the primary sources like Mark, Q, M, L or in more than one form);
3. *divergent patterns* (it is contrary to emphases in the early church);
4. *unintended evidence of historicity* (details which suggest an eyewitness report);
5. *Aramaic or Palestinian features* (Semitic constructions or Palestinian customs which point to a early origin); and
6. *coherence* (it is consistent with other passages proven reliable on the basis of other criteria).

These in and of themselves do not prove authenticity, of course, but they can demonstrate that the tradition goes back to the earliest stages and they do shift the burden of proof to the skeptic.

These criteria were originally developed under a so-called hermeneutic of suspicion which assumed that the stories were «guilty unless proven innocent» that is, they were nonhistorical unless shown otherwise. However, it has repeatedly been shown that the criteria when used in this manner have proved inconclusive, and most today use them more positively to trace the text's development. In this way tradition criticism provides the data for the form-critical and redaction-critical stages which follow. Nevertheless, demonstrating the text's reliability (the positive side) is an important step in itself since it grounds the interpreters in history and forces them to realize that they are not just tracing the ideas of Mark or Matthew (a danger of redactional study) but also the very life and teachings of the historical Jesus.

Tradition criticism used in this way is an important step prior to carrying out redactional study. Its primary value lies in the area of historical verification, for it links redactional study with the quest for the historical Jesus and anchors the results in history. One danger of redaction criticism is the tendency of many critics today to take an ahistorical approach--to study the Gospels as purely literary creations rather than as books which trace the life of Jesus. Tradition criticism provides a control against such tendencies. Moreover, the study of the history of the development of the text, though admittedly speculative at times, leads to greater accuracy in identifying redactional tendencies. By tracing with greater precision how an author is using the sources and how the sources have developed, the results of redactional criticism will be established on a stronger data base.

#### 3.2 Form-Critical Analysis

Before beginning the detailed study of a pericope it is crucial to determine the form it takes, since the interpreter will apply a different set of hermeneutical principles to each subgenre in the Gospels. A pericope can take the form of a *pronouncement story* (the setting and details lead up to a climactic saying of Jesus); *miracle story* (some emphasizing the miracle or exorcism, others discipleship, christology, cosmic conflict or the presence of the kingdom); *dominical saying* (further classified by Bultmann as wisdom logia, prophetic or apocalyptic sayings, legal sayings or church rules, «I» sayings and similitudes); *parable* (further into similitudes, example stories, and one-, two- or three-point parables depending on the number of characters involved); *event or historical story* (episodes in Jesus' life like the baptism or Transfiguration—often labeled «legends» because of their supernatural nature); and *passion story* (considered a separate type even though the passion narrative contains several actual «forms»). In the final analysis the formal features help more in the stage of composition criticism than in redactional study, but these are two aspects of a larger whole and therefore form-critical analysis is an important part of the redactional process.

### 3.3. Redaction-Critical Analysis

The interpreter examines the pericope and notes each time the source (Mark or Q) has been changed in order to determine whether the alteration is redactional or stylistic; that is, whether it has a theological purpose or is cosmetic, part of the Evangelist's normal style. While this process is obviously more conducive for Matthew and Luke, since sources in Mark are so difficult to detect and John is so independent, most scholars believe that a nuanced redaction criticism may still be applied to Mark and John (though without many of the source-critical techniques). The principles which follow are intended to guide the student through the process as it applies to all four Gospels. There are two stages—the individual analysis of a single pericope, and holistic analysis which studies redactional strata that appear throughout the Gospel. These aspects work together, as the data emerge from the individual studies and are evaluated on the basis of recurring themes in the whole.

#### 3.3.1. Individual Analysis

The text of the synopsis should first be underlined with different colors to denote which readings are unique to a Gospel, which are paralleled in Mark and Matthew, Mark and Luke or Matthew and Luke (Q), and which are found in all three. The next step is to evaluate the data. S. McKnight (85-87) notes seven ways the Evangelists redact their sources:

1. They can *conserve* them (important because this also has theological significance for the Evangelist);
2. *correlate two traditions* (as in the use of both Mark and Q in the temptation story of Matthew and Luke);
3. *expand the source* (e.g., Matthew's added material in the walking-on-the-water miracle, Mt 14:22-33; cf. Mk 6:45-52);
4. *transpose the settings* (as in the different settings for Jesus' compassion for Jerusalem in Mt 23:37-39 and Lk 13:34-35);
5. *omit portions* of the tradition (e.g., the missing descriptions of demonic activity in the healing of the demon possessed child, Mt 17:14-21; cf. Mk 9:14-29);
6. *explain details* in the source (e.g., Mark's lengthy explanation of washing the hands, Mk 7:3-4; or Matthew changing «Son of man» to «I», 10:32; cf. Lk 12:8); or
7. *alter a tradition to avoid misunderstandings* (as when Matthew alters Mark's «Why do you call me good?» <sup>Mk 10:18</sup> to «Why do you ask me about what is good?» <sup>Mt 19:17</sup>).

By grouping the changes the student can detect patterns which point to certain theological nuances within the larger matrix of the story as a whole. Each change is evaluated in terms of potential meaning; that is, does it possess theological significance as it affects the development of the story? For instance, Matthew changes the endings of both Mark 6:52 («Their heart was hardened», cf. Mt 14:33, «Surely you are the Son of God») and 8:21 («Don't you understand yet?» cf. Mt 16:12, «Then they understood ... »). In both Gospels these two sets of endings conclude the group of stories centered on the feedings of the five thousand and four thousand. It is likely that the differences are due to Mark's stress on the reality of

discipleship failure and Matthew's emphasis on the difference that the presence of Jesus makes in overcoming failure.

### 3.3.2. Holistic Analysis

The individual analysis is now expanded to note the development of themes as the narrative of the whole Gospel unfolds. Decisions regarding single accounts are somewhat preliminary until they are corroborated by the presence of similar themes elsewhere. Also, these steps enable one to discover redactional emphases in Mark and John, for which the interpreter has difficulty noting sources.

The «seams» in a Gospel are the introductions, conclusions and transitions which connect the episodes and provide important clues to the theological purpose of the author. They often contain a high proportion of the author's own language and point to an Evangelist's particular reasons for including the pericope. For instance, the two seams in Mark 1:21 and 3:1 provide a synagogue setting for the christological emphasis on Jesus' authority in word and deed as he confronts the Jewish leaders. Also, the summaries in a Gospel are redactional indicators of theological overtones. An example of this would be Matthew 4:23 and 9:35 (introducing the Sermon on the Mount and missionary discourse, respectively), which contain similar wording and summarize Jesus' itinerant missionary activity. The threefold emphasis on teaching, preaching and healing are major theological emphases in Matthew.

Editorial asides and insertions are key indicators of the theological direction a narrative is taking. John has long been known for his tendency to add explanatory comments to describe the significance more fully, as in his famous commentary (3:16-21) on the soteriological significance of the Nicodemus dialog (3:1-15). In similar fashion, repeated or favorite terms show particular interests. Again, John is the master of this technique; nearly every theological stress is highlighted by terms which appear nearly as often in his Gospel as in the rest of the NT together (e.g., *aletheia* <sup>85 of the 163 NT uses</sup>, *zoe* <sup>66 of the 135 NT uses</sup>, or *kosmos* <sup>105 of the 185 NT uses</sup>) and by **word groups** of synonymous terms (e.g., the two terms for «know», two for «love» or five for «see»).

Finally, theme studies (McKnight calls this «motif analysis») trace the development of theological emphases within the Gospel as a whole. Here one reads through the Gospel, noting the theological threads which are woven together into the fabric of the whole. For instance, one of Mark's primary themes is discipleship failure, introduced in Mk 4:38, 40 and then emerging as a major emphasis in the «hardened heart» passages of Mk 6:52 and 8:17. The passion predictions are contrasted with the disciples' failure (Mk 8:31-33; 9:31-34; 10:32-40). Chapter 14 contains several scenes of failure (Mk 14:4-5, 10-11, 17-20, 27-31, 37-40, 51-52, 66-72), and the Gospel ends on a note of discipleship failure (Mk 16:8).

Mark is a special test case for holistic analysis and for redaction criticism as a whole. If one accepts the prevalent theory of Markan priority, then there are no obvious sources (Matthew and Luke have Mark and C!) with which to compare Mark in order to determine redactional peculiarities. The traditions behind Mark are very difficult to detect, and no scholarly consensus has yet emerged as to their identity. As a result there is a bewildering array of theories regarding the redactional nature of the Second Gospel. In order to overcome these problems, R. Stein (positive regarding the possibilities) and M. Black (skeptical about the possibilities) have proposed several criteria for redactional research:

- (1) Study the seams, insertions and summaries;
- (2) determine whether Mark has created (a controversial criterion) or modified traditional material;
- (3) note Mark's process of selecting and arranging material;
- (4) ask whether Mark has omitted material (also controversial because the question always arises whether Mark has omitted an emphasis or been unaware of it, e.g., the famous Matthean addendum to the divorce passage, «except for adultery»);
- (5) study Mark's introduction and conclusion; and
- (6) elucidate Mark's vocabulary, style and christological titles.

When all these tools are used together, the Gospels of Mark or John open themselves to redactional study.

### 3.4. Composition-Critical Analysis

The task is incomplete so long as one focuses only on the redactional changes, so most recent redaction critics wish to study the traditions included as well as the redactional modifications. Obviously,

each Evangelist unified tradition and redaction into a larger whole in producing a Gospel. It is erroneous to examine only the redaction.

### 3.4.1. The Structure

The way the Evangelist arranges material tells a great deal about the meaning of the whole. At both the micro and macro levels the rearrangement of the inherited tradition is significant. In the temptation narrative Matthew and Luke reverse the last two temptations. Most believe that Matthew contains the original order and that Luke concludes with the Temple temptation due to his special interest in Jerusalem and the Temple (Lk 4:9-12). But it is also possible that Matthew concludes with a mountain scene for thematic reasons (Mt 4:8-10; cf. 5:1; 8:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1). At the macro level, one could note the quite different things which Mark and Luke do with Jesus' early Capernaum-based ministry, with Mark placing the call to the disciples first, due to his discipleship emphasis (Mk 1:16-20), and reserving the rejection at Nazareth for later (Mk 6:1-6), while Luke begins with Jesus' inaugural address and rejection at Nazareth (Lk 4:16-30) in order to center upon christology, reserving the call of the disciples for later (Lk 5:1-11).

### 3.4.2. Intertextual Development

Each Evangelist arranges pericopes in such a way that their interaction with one another yields the intended message. Intertextuality at the macro level is the literary counterpart to redaction criticism at the micro level, for the Evangelist uses the same techniques of selection, omission and structure in both. This is exemplified in Mark's strategic placing of the two-stage healing of the blind man in Mark 8:22-26 (found only in Mark). On one level it forms an inclusion with the healing of the deaf man in Mark 7:31-37, stressing the need for healing on the part of the disciples (note the failure of Mk 8:14-21, in which the disciples are accused of being both blind and deaf!). On another level it metaphorically anticipates the two-stage surmounting of the disciples' misunderstanding via Peter's confession (Mk 8:27-33, only a partial understanding) and the Transfiguration (Mk 9:1-10, at which time they glimpse the true nature of Jesus, cf. esp. Mk 9:9).

### 3.4.3. Plot

Plot refers to the interconnected sequence of events which follows a cause-effect pattern and centers upon conflict. The student examines how the characters interact and how the lines of causality develop to a climax. For redaction criticism this means especially the individual emphases of the Evangelists. The differences are often striking, as in the resurrection narratives. Mark follows a linear pattern, tracing the failure of the disciples and concluding with the women's inability to witness (Mk 16:8). This is countered by the enigmatic promise of Jesus to meet them in Galilee (Mk 16:7; cf. 14:28), apparently the place of reinstatement (note Mk 14:28 following 14:27). Matthew constructs a double-edged conflict in which the supernatural intervention of God (Mt 28:2-4) and the universal authority of Jesus (Mt 28:18-20) overcome the twofold attempt of the priests to thwart the divine plan (Mt 27:62-66; 28:11-15).

### 3.4.4. Setting and Style

When the Evangelists place a saying or event in different settings, they often produce a new theological thrust. For instance, Matthew places the parable of the lost sheep (Mt 18:12-14) in the context of the disciples and the church, with the result that it refers to straying members, while in Luke 15:3-7 Jesus addresses the same parable to the Pharisees and scribes, so that it refers to those outside the kingdom.

Style refers to the individual way that a saying or story is phrased and arranged so as to produce the effect that the author wishes. There can be gaps, chiasm, repetition, omissions and highly paraphrased renditions in order to highlight some nuance which Jesus gave his teaching but which is of particular interest to the Evangelist. Here it is important to remember that the Evangelists' concern was not the *ipsissima verba* (exact words) but the *ipsissima vox* (the very voice) of Jesus. They were free to give highly paraphrastic renditions to stress one certain aspect. One example is the Matthean and Lukan forms of the Beatitudes, which most scholars take to be derived from the same occasion (Luke's «plain» can also mean a

mountain plateau in Greek). In Matthew the central stress is on ethical qualities («blessed are the poor in spirit», Mt 5:3), while in Luke the emphasis is on economic deprivation («blessed are you poor», Mt 5:20; cf. «woe to you rich», Mt 5:24). Both were undoubtedly intended by Jesus, while the two Evangelists highlighted different aspects.

#### **4. The Weaknesses of Redaction Criticism**

Many have discounted the value of redaction criticism due to the excesses of some of its practitioners. Primarily, it has been the application of redaction criticism along with historical skepticism that has led some to reject the approach. As a result of the influence of form and tradition criticism in the past and of narrative criticism in the present, the historical reliability of Gospel stories has been called into question. Certainly some critics have begun with the premise that redaction entails the creation of Gospel material which is unhistorical, but this is by no means a necessary conclusion.

Techniques like omission, expansion or rearrangement are attributes of style and are not criteria for historicity. Another problem is redaction criticism's dependence on the four-document hypothesis. It is true that the results would look quite different if one were to assume the Griesbach hypothesis (the priority of Matthew). However, 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.

As in form criticism, redactional studies tend to fragment the pericopes when they study only the additions to the traditions. Theology is to be found in the combined tradition and redaction--not in the redaction alone. The movement to *composition criticism* has provided a healthy corrective. The Evangelists' alterations are the major source of evidence, but the theology comes from the whole. Similarly, there has been a problem with overstatement. Scholars have often seen significance in every «jot and little» and have forgotten that many changes are stylistic rather than theological. Once again, composition criticism helps avoid excesses by looking for patterns rather than seeing theology in every possible instance.

Subjectivism is another major danger. Studies utilizing the same data frequently produce different results, and thus some argue that no assured results can ever come from redaction-critical studies. The only solution is a judicious use of *all* the hermeneutical tools along with cross-pollination between the studies. Interaction between theories can demonstrate where the weaknesses are in each. Subjectivism is especially seen in 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. This ignores the fact that many of the emphases are due to christological, liturgical, historical or evangelistic interests. The proper life-situation study is not so much concerned with the detailed reconstruction of the church behind a Gospel as in the delineation of the Evangelists' message to that church.

#### **5. The Place and value of Redaction Criticism**

A careful use of proper methodology can reduce the problems inherent in redaction criticism, and the values far outweigh the dangers. In fact, any study of the Gospels will be enhanced by redaction-critical techniques. A true understanding of the doctrine of inspiration demands it, for each Evangelist was led by God to utilize sources in the production of a Gospel. Moreover, they were given the freedom by God to omit, expand and highlight these traditions in order to bring out individual nuances peculiar to their own Gospel. Nothing else can explain the differing messages of the same stories as told in the various Gospels. There is no necessity to theorize wholesale creation of stories, nor to assert that these nuances were not in keeping with the original Gospels. Here a judicious harmonizing approach like that espoused by C. Blomberg is valuable. In short, redaction criticism has enabled us to rediscover the Evangelists as inspired authors and to understand their books for the first time as truly Gospels; not just biographical accounts but history with a message. They did not merely chronicle events but interpreted them and produced historical sermons.

Until redaction criticism arose, Christians tended to turn to the epistles for theology. Now we know that the Gospels are not only theological but in some ways communicate a theology even more relevant than the epistles, because these truths are presented not through didactic literature but by means of the living relationships reflected in narrative. The Gospels are «casestudy» workbooks for theological truth, yielding not just theology taught but theology lived and modelled. Redactional study enables us to reconstruct with some precision the theology of each of the Evangelists by noting how they utilized their sources and then by discovering patterns in the changes which exemplify themes developed through the

Gospels. The whole (tradition, redaction and compositional development) interact together to produce the inspired message of each Evangelist.

In this way the reader understands the twofold purpose of the Gospels: to present the life and teachings of the historical Jesus (the historical component) in such a way as to address the church and the world (the kerygmatic component). History and theology are valid aspects of Gospel analysis, and we dare not neglect either without destroying the God-ordained purpose of the Gospels. While redaction criticism as a discipline centers on the theological aspect, it does not ignore the historical nature of the Gospels.

Finally, redaction criticism is a preaching and not just an academic tool. The Gospels were originally contextualizations of the life and teaching of Jesus for the reading and listening audiences of the Evangelists' time. They were biographical sermons (one aspect of the meaning of the term «Gospel») applying Jesus' impact on his disciples, the crowds and the Jewish leaders to first-century readers and listeners. This is perhaps the best use of life-situation approaches, for they show how Matthew or Luke addressed problems in their communities and demonstrate how they can address similar problems in our churches.

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