

Dr. Robert C. Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 14, Form Criticism

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 14, Form Criticism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Robert Newman's lecture on form criticism explores its origins, methods, and implications for understanding the Synoptic Gospels. The lecture traces the development of form criticism from its roots in German scholarship, highlighting key figures like Bultmann and Gunkel and their influences. **It explains how form critics analyze gospel material to identify original, orally transmitted units.** The lecture also covers the typical forms of Gospel material such as miracle stories, saying stories, and isolated sayings, while outlining the assertions that form critics make about these forms. **Newman evaluates form criticism's assertions, specifically those of Bultmann, while considering both its limitations and positive contributions to biblical study.** Ultimately, the lecture provides a comprehensive overview of form criticism and its impact on understanding the historical Jesus and the composition of the Gospels.

2. 11 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 14 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → Gospels → Synoptic Gospels).



**Newman_Synoptics
_Session14.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 14, Form Criticism

Okay, here's a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided excerpt of Dr. Robert C. Newman's lecture on Form Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels.

Briefing Document: Form Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels

Main Themes:

- **Introduction to Form Criticism:** The lecture introduces form criticism as a method for analyzing orally transmitted materials to recover their original versions, based on the assumption that literary forms can be identified and restored. Form criticism is presented as a way to understand how stories and sayings changed during oral circulation.
- **Historical Background:** Form criticism, originating in Germany, has roots in several strands of liberal thought: F.C. Bauer's reconstruction of church history based on Hegelian dialectics (thesis, antithesis, synthesis); David Friedrich Strauss' mythical approach to the Gospels; Weiss and Holtzmann's documentary theory (Mark and Q as sources); liberal arguments over the character of Jesus; Wrede and Wellhausen's skepticism regarding Mark and Q as theological constructs; and Hermann Gunkel's work on identifying small units in the Old Testament.
- **Methods of Form Criticism:** The lecture explains the process of form criticism, beginning with defining a "form" and describing the assertions of Bultmann-type form critics. Key claims include: a period of oral tradition before the Gospels, sayings and narratives circulating as independent units, classification of these units by form (sayings, saying stories, miracle stories), the early church inventing/expanding units, the material having limited biographical/chronological value, and the potential to recover the original version of each unit using laws of tradition.
- **Application of Form Criticism:** Examples are provided of how form critics analyze miracle stories (demon-possessed man, Jesus rebuking the wind), saying stories (man with withered hand, picking grain on the Sabbath), and sayings (proverbs, prophetic sayings, law words, I-words, parables).
- **Bultmann's Results and Evaluation:** The lecture summarizes Rudolf Bultmann's conclusions regarding the life of Christ based on form criticism, which are highly

skeptical. Bultmann concludes few Gospel traditions are genuine and that many are later inventions of the early church. The lecture concludes with an evaluation of form criticism's assertions and highlights both positive and negative aspects. It criticizes form criticism for being hyper-skeptical and relying on worldview assumptions to dismiss supernatural elements.

Most Important Ideas and Facts:

- **Definition of Form Criticism:** "Form criticism is a method of analyzing materials that have been orally transmitted in an attempt to recover their original versions on the assumption that their literary forms can be identified and restored to their primitive conditions."
- **Rudolf Bultmann:** The dominant figure in the application of form criticism to the New Testament, beginning after World War I.
- **Sitz im Leben:** The "life situation" in which a story or saying originated, a concept borrowed from Hermann Gunkel's Old Testament studies.
- **Basic Forms Identified:** The three primary forms identified by form critics are:
 - Sayings (isolated statements of Jesus)
 - Saying Stories (a saying with a narrative context)
 - Miracle Stories (narratives of miraculous events)
- **Assumptions About Oral Tradition:** Form critics assume that stories and sayings circulated orally for an extended period (Bultmann argued for two generations), and during this time, they were altered and embellished to meet the needs of the early church.
- **Bultmann's Skepticism:** Bultmann concluded that very little of the Gospel material is historically accurate, rejecting miracle stories and many sayings as later inventions. He largely dismissed the biographical, geographical, and chronological value of the Gospels.
- **Dissonance Criterion:** A criterion used to determine authenticity: If a saying or story goes against the interests or beliefs of both Jews and early Christians, it's more likely to be genuine (i.e., from Jesus). Newman criticizes this methodology.
- **Evaluation of Form Criticism:** While acknowledging some value in identifying forms and structures, Newman criticizes form criticism for its hyper-skepticism, its reliance on questionable "laws of tradition," and its tendency to dismiss

supernatural elements based on presuppositions. He emphasizes that form criticism alone doesn't necessarily prove falsification or invalidate the core teachings of Jesus.

Key Quotes:

- "The idea is that stories or sayings circulate orally, and as they do that, their content and complexity change in predictable ways, somewhat like the stories about the fish that got away that always seem to get bigger as the story is repeated over and over." (Explanation of how oral tradition changes stories)
- "Bultmann claimed his method, form criticism, could distinguish earlier material from later material, could distinguish Gentile from Jewish sources, and could thus determine which materials really went back to Jesus."
- "Fifth, these materials have little or no real biographical, chronological, or geographical value." (Bultmann's view on the historical value of Gospel material)
- "Bultmann thinks Jesus lived, suffered, and died...but they misunderstood him if they thought he was the Messiah, much less if they thought he was Savior or God." (Bultmann's view of Jesus)
- "If it were applied elsewhere, we would know very little about the past. Some skepticism is helpful, but with too much, you throw out much of what you need." (Newman's critique of form criticism's hyper-skepticism)

Significance:

The lecture provides a comprehensive overview of form criticism, a significant but controversial method of biblical analysis. It clarifies the historical development of the method, its key assumptions, and its application to the Synoptic Gospels. It also offers a critical evaluation of form criticism, raising important questions about its validity and limitations. The lecture emphasizes the importance of considering the historical context, authorship, and transmission of the Gospel accounts when assessing their reliability.

4. Study Guide: Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 14, Form Criticism

Form Criticism: A Study Guide

Quiz

1. What are the two German terms that roughly translate to "form criticism," and what do they mean?
2. Briefly explain F.C. Bauer's influence on Bultmann's form criticism.
3. What are the four elements behind form criticism, and how did they influence Bultmann's approach?
4. Explain the concept of *sitz im leben* and its significance in form criticism.
5. List the three groups Bultmann used to classify Gospel units by form.
6. According to Bultmann, what are the characteristics of a primitive narrative?
7. Describe the typical structure of a miracle story according to form critics.
8. Explain the difference between Jewish and Greek saying stories, according to Bultmann.
9. List three of the five kinds of sayings that Bultmann identifies in the Gospels.
10. What are two of Bultmann's arguments for authenticity of sayings that are derived from dissonance?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The two German terms are *Formgeschichte* (form history) and *Gattungsforschung* (genre of research). These terms refer to the analysis of literary forms to understand their historical development and genre.
2. Bauer applied Hegel's philosophy of history to church history, seeing a struggle between a Jewish church (led by Peter) and a Gentile church (led by Paul). Bultmann later used this idea to date sources in the gospel material, claiming to find two separate early Jewish and Gentile churches.
3. The four elements are: F.C. Bauer's reconstruction of church history, David Friedrich Strauss' mythical approach, Bernard Weiss and H.J. Holtzmann's documentary theory, and old liberal arguments over the character of Jesus.

Bauer's ideas about the conflict between the Jewish and Gentile churches, Strauss' mythical approach that said much of the gospel was mythical, Weiss and Holtzmann's documentary theory, and old liberal arguments all influenced Bultmann's approach by providing him with a framework for analyzing and interpreting the Gospels.

4. *Sitz im leben* is a German term that translates to "life situation." In form criticism, it refers to the original social and historical context in which a particular story or saying originated. Reconstructing the *sitz im leben* helps critics understand the purpose and meaning of the text in its original setting.
5. The three groups are: sayings (isolated statements of Jesus), saying stories (proverbs or pithy sayings with supporting stories), and miracle stories (narratives of miraculous events).
6. According to Bultmann, a primitive narrative is characterized by a single scene, a short time period, only two or three characters, and any groups present act as a unit.
7. The typical structure of a miracle story includes: a description of the problem, the solution enacted by the healer (Jesus), and the effect of the miracle (reaction of the healed person or the crowd).
8. Jewish saying stories are similar to those in rabbinic literature, where someone asks Jesus a question and he responds with a parable or another question. Greek saying stories are introduced by a stereotype formula, such as "When he was asked by someone about something, he said," and lack a real story or background.
9. The five kinds of sayings that Bultmann identifies are: proverbs (or Logia), prophetic or apocalyptic sayings, law words or commandments, I words, and parables.
10. One argument from dissonance is when neither Jews nor persecuted Christians like paying taxes, so the saying about paying taxes to Caesar must be authentic, another one states that allowing the perfume to be poured out is strange given the interest in both Christians and Jews in helping the poor. Because not scolding at a waste of money is unique, Bultmann thought that that was authentic.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the background of form criticism, detailing the key figures and intellectual movements that influenced its development.
2. Explain the methods of form criticism, including the process of isolating, classifying, and analyzing Gospel units.
3. Critically evaluate Bultmann's application of form criticism to the Gospels, focusing on his conclusions about the historicity of miracle stories and sayings.
4. Compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of form criticism as a method for interpreting the Synoptic Gospels.
5. Analyze the assertions of form criticism, evaluating the extent to which they hold true when applied to the Synoptic Gospels, and consider alternative perspectives on Gospel authorship and transmission.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Form Criticism:** A method of biblical criticism that analyzes the literary forms of biblical texts to reconstruct their original versions and understand their historical development.
- **Formgeschichte:** A German term meaning "form history," referring to the study of the historical development of literary forms.
- **Gattungsforschung:** A German term meaning "genre research," referring to the study of the genres of literary texts.
- **Sitz im Leben:** A German term meaning "life situation," referring to the original social and historical context in which a particular text or tradition originated.
- **Synoptic Problem:** The question of the literary relationship between the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).
- **Two-Document Theory:** The hypothesis that Matthew and Luke used Mark and Q as their primary sources.
- **Q (Quelle):** A hypothetical source containing sayings of Jesus, believed to have been used by Matthew and Luke.

- **Oral Tradition:** The transmission of stories, sayings, and other information by word of mouth before being written down.
- **Redaction Criticism:** A method of biblical criticism that studies how the Gospel writers (redactors) edited and shaped their sources to express their theological perspectives.
- **Logia:** Sayings or pronouncements, especially those attributed to Jesus.
- **Multiple Attestation:** The presence of a saying or story in multiple independent sources, suggesting that it is more likely to be authentic.
- **Dissonance:** A criterion for authenticity, suggesting that a saying or story is more likely to be genuine if it is inconsistent with the beliefs or practices of the early church.
- **Myth:** In the context of form criticism (specifically Strauss), a narrative that conveys religious truth but is not necessarily historically accurate.
- **Kingdom of God:** The reign or rule of God, a central theme in the teachings of Jesus.
- **Eschatology:** The study of the end times or the final events in history.
- **Parable:** A short story used by Jesus to teach a moral or spiritual lesson.
- **Synoptic Gospels:** The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so called because they share a similar structure and content, allowing them to be "seen together."
- **Redactor:** An editor or compiler of a text, especially in the context of redaction criticism.
- **Gnostic:** A member of a religious movement or perspective that believes in salvation through esoteric knowledge.
- **Messianic Secret:** A theory by William Wrede that Mark's Gospel repeatedly portrays Jesus as suppressing the acknowledgement of his messianic identity.

5. FAQs on Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 14, Form Criticism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Form Criticism FAQ

Here are some frequently asked questions regarding Form Criticism

1. What is Form Criticism?

Form Criticism (Formgeschichte in German) is a method used to analyze orally transmitted materials, like those found in the Gospels, to identify their original versions. It assumes that as stories and sayings were passed down orally, they changed in predictable ways, and that these changes can be analyzed and traced back to a primitive original. It seeks to classify these units by their "form" (e.g., sayings, miracle stories) and then reconstruct the "life setting" (Sitz im Leben) in which they originated within the early church.

2. What are the historical roots of Form Criticism?

Form criticism emerged from a confluence of 19th and early 20th-century liberal theological thought. Key influences include:

- **F.C. Bauer's Hegelian Church History:** Bauer viewed early church history as a conflict between Jewish and Gentile churches, influencing how later critics dated Gospel sources.
- **David Friedrich Strauss' Mythical Approach:** Strauss argued the Gospels were largely mythical, promoting religious truths rather than historical events.
- **Documentary Theory (Weiss and Holtzmann):** Building on the two-document hypothesis (Mark and Q as sources for Matthew and Luke), form critics sought to go behind these sources to the oral traditions.
- **Liberal Arguments over the Character of Jesus:** Form criticism attempted to clarify the conflicting portraits of Jesus by getting back to the "real" historical figure.
- **Skepticism of Wrede and Wellhausen:** Questioned the historical reliability even of Mark and Q, leading to a focus on isolated sayings.
- **Old Testament Form Criticism (Hermann Gunkel):** Gunkel identified small units (legends, psalms) in the Old Testament that were once oral before being written down, which inspired Bultmann.

3. What are the key assumptions made by Form Critics?

Form critics operate on several key assumptions:

- There was a significant period of oral tradition before the Gospels were written (typically two generations or more).
- During this period, Gospel sayings and narratives circulated as independent units.
- These units can be classified by their form into distinct categories (sayings, saying stories, miracle stories, etc.).
- The early church both preserved and invented material to meet its practical needs.
- The Gospel materials have little biographical, chronological, or geographical value.
- The original version of each tradition unit can be recovered using the laws of tradition.

4. What are the basic forms identified in the Gospel material by Form Critics?

Form critics identify three basic forms in the Gospel material:

- **Sayings:** Isolated statements of Jesus without any supporting narrative. These are further subdivided into proverbs (Logia), prophetic/apocalyptic sayings, law words/commandments, "I" words (where Jesus refers to himself), and parables.
- **Saying Stories:** Brief narratives that illuminate the meaning or impact of a saying of Jesus.
- **Miracle Stories:** Narratives describing a miraculous event performed by Jesus. These typically follow a structure of problem, solution (Jesus' action), and effect/reaction.

5. How do Form Critics reconstruct the original form of a saying or story?

Form critics employ the following procedure to analyze each unit to get its most primitive form and then try to decide whether that unit goes back to Jesus or not:

- **Isolation:** Stories and sayings are isolated from their context in the Gospels, which is assumed to be a purely editorial invention.
- **Simplification:** The "laws of tradition" are applied to recover the original or primitive state of each story or saying. Primitive narratives are thought to be characterized by a single scene, a short time period, few characters, and any groups who are present act as a unit.
- **Attribution:** An attempt is made to determine which early group (Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians, or Jesus himself) was responsible for the primitive form.

6. What criteria do Form Critics use to determine the authenticity of a saying or story?

Form critics use several criteria to assess whether a saying or story originated with Jesus:

- **Multiple Attestation:** If a form appears in multiple independent sources (e.g., Mark and Q), it is more likely to be authentic.
- **Dissonance:** If a saying or story contains elements that are difficult to reconcile with the interests or beliefs of the early church (Jewish or Gentile), it is more likely to be authentic. For instance, Jesus actually said those things which we cannot imagine any other early source would say—for instance, paying taxes to Caesar. The Jews didn't like paying taxes. Christians didn't like paying taxes. So, it must go back to Jesus.

7. What are some criticisms of Form Criticism?

Form criticism has faced significant criticism:

- **Overemphasis on Oral Tradition:** Critics argue that form criticism overestimates the length of the oral tradition period and underestimates the role of eyewitnesses and written sources from the start. The apostles knew the string, as well as the beads, and other teachers like the Seventy, knew how the incidents went together, and this connecting information was never lost.
- **Questionable "Laws of Tradition":** The assumed laws governing the development of oral traditions are often based on limited evidence and can be subjective.

- **Subjectivity and Bias:** The process of isolating and simplifying Gospel units can be highly subjective, leading to results that are influenced by the critic's own theological biases.
- **Neglect of Gospel Authors' Intent:** Form criticism often disregards the intentions and literary skills of the Gospel authors, viewing them as mere compilers of independent traditions.
- **Skepticism:** Form criticism is hyper-skeptical. If it were applied elsewhere, we would know very little about the past.

8. What are the lasting contributions of Form Criticism?

Despite its limitations, form criticism has made some lasting contributions:

- **Emphasis on Orality:** It highlights the importance of oral tradition in the transmission of early Christian teachings.
- **Genre Awareness:** It encourages careful attention to the different literary forms found in the Gospels.
- **Historical Context:** It emphasizes the need to understand the historical and social context in which the Gospel stories and sayings originated.
- **Broad Outlines of Gospels:** The Gospel accounts contain just the sort of material we would expect in the authentic reminiscences of men who witnessed memorable events, especially if they were charged with teaching these events and had then done so for some time before writing. We observe, for instance, broad outlines.
- **Limitations of a Non-Messianic, Non-Miraculous Jesus:** Form criticism has made a positive contribution by showing that we have no tradition in the Gospels of a non-Messianic, non-miraculous, purely human Jesus.