

False Dichotomies in Gospel Studies  
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**I. INTRODUCTION.**

I am particularly thankful to James Thompson and the other editors at Restoration Quarterly for the invitation to address this group this morning. I have taken this opportunity to reflect out loud on some of the larger issues, theoretical and hermeneutical, that are driving my current research and writing. And more importantly I hope this will generate fruitful interaction— yielding comments and criticisms from many of you—as you react and perhaps push back on some of my reflections or push me forward, as the case may be.

The area of New Testament studies that particularly interests me is the broad arena of gospel studies. As with all scholars, I am a product of my time—I have inherited certain perspectives and approaches toward the gospels that I am sure are primarily the product of the shape of my education and the tendencies of my colleagues and mentors. But I also find that on many issues I am “swimming against the tide.” The area of gospel studies is deeply compartmentalized, with sharp lines dividing the areas. Students of the gospels are presented a cluster or sharp dichotomies: one chooses either the synoptic gospels or John; one is either a historical critic or uses literary approaches; one shares a modernist perspective or a post-modernist view; one either is operates from within a critical perspective or a faith perspective. And as I try to identifying “my own kind”—my discourse community—I seem to be neither fish nor fowl. That is to say, in the various dichotomies listed above I find value to each side of the issue. As a result, let me posit as a thesis for this morning’s talk that *the dichotomies listed*

*have been overemphasized, are indeed false or misleading, and that gospel scholars should be finding ways to speak across the divides, to claim both/and rather than either/or approaches.*

## **II. DICHOTOMY #1: JOHN VS. SYNOPTIC**

In the study of the gospels, a significant gulf exists between the first three gospels, the synoptic gospels, and the Fourth Gospel. This is seen perhaps most dramatically in the study of the historical Jesus—so much so that Albert Schweitzer’s first clear “either-or” is that of “either John or the Synoptics.”<sup>1</sup> Schweitzer himself points to the influence of F. C. Baur and the Tübingen School in delineating in very stark terms the contrast between the Synoptics and John, a contrast which is now accepted as something approaching scholarly “orthodoxy.” It might be useful to review the substance of Baur’s critique of the Fourth Gospel:<sup>2</sup>

1. John is thoroughly theological
2. John is primarily the product of a Hellenistic environment
3. John is late, and thus represents a long transmission or late use of sources
4. John is dependent on the Synoptics

This is not the venue to launch into a detailed engagement with Baur’s points.<sup>3</sup> But especially since they have been so important on the shape of gospel studies and historical Jesus research, I think is important to briefly examine them – **especially since every one of them is subject to fierce debate, and in fact I think every one of them is false.** So, briefly, let me summarize the objections:

1. While it is probably true to say that John is thoroughly theological, this is misleading in that it suggests that the other gospels are not thoroughly theological. But as we have gained some appreciation for the role of the composer in all the gospels, it is increasingly clear that they are all

thoroughly theological. Moreover, being theological does not inherently taint a gospel as being less reliable as a historical witness or a bearer of sound traditions. It simply means that the ideological underpinnings of the document are grounded in a view of God's action.

2. Perhaps we should attribute the idea that John is fundamentally a Hellenistic gospel primarily to 19<sup>th</sup> century approaches to the gospels, although the viewpoint still has a significant following. But the discoveries of the Qumran and other sectarian Jewish writings have modified our view of John, since many of the Hellenistic features are found in these writings as well.<sup>4</sup> And our confidence that somehow Palestine avoided being fairly extensively hellenized is also now shaken.<sup>5</sup> As a result, it is quite possible – even preferable to many – to place the origin of the Fourth Gospel within a Palestinian Jewish milieu.

3 & 4. The lateness of John is itself dependent on the question of its relationship to the Synoptics. This relationship still remains an open question, one subject to active debate.<sup>6</sup> Prior to Percival Gardner-Smith's essay in the early twentieth century, the almost uniform conception was that John was dependent on the Synoptic gospels.<sup>7</sup> Under the influence of form criticism, the tide then turned to see John as independent of the Synoptics. It would be fair to say that scholarly opinion is now split on this question. The dating of John is obviously related to this. If John is dependent on the Synoptics, either one or all of them, then it must be later. If John is independent, it may be earlier. In my recently published dissertation, I suggest that Luke at least is aware of John and writes in dialogue with at least Mark and John.<sup>8</sup> But I am by no means alone in suggesting that John is relatively early, indeed a growing number of minority voices have suggested an early date for John.<sup>9</sup> This previously unheard of position gave rise two years ago to a conference in Salzburg, Austria – Für und wider die

Priorität des Johannesevangeliums – at which Paul Anderson, Klaus Berger, Jim Charlesworth and others, including myself, engaged the question of whether John is an early and independent gospel.

All of the foregoing discussion was to highlight the tenuous nature of John's marginalization as a possible "historical" basis of Jesus' life. As we have come to consider each of the gospels to be a theological and rhetorical document written by an evangelist living in the culturally diverse Greco Roman empire of the late first century, the completely distinctive nature of the Fourth Gospel becomes less tenable.

But if John is one example of the variety of responses to Jesus in the early development of the church, and if it cannot be automatically rejected or minimized as theological, or late, or Hellenistic, then perhaps the dichotomization of our scholarship needs to be rejected as well.

Beyond simply the historical and theological value of holding both John and the Synoptics in view together, rejecting the dichotomy between John and the Synoptics would also further the exploration of how ancient stories of Jesus were constructed. By comparing the gospels in creative tension, analysis of the rhetorical and literary features in each strain of the Jesus tradition could be enhanced, highlighting both common and divergent tendencies.

### **III. DICHOTOMY #2: HISTORICAL-CRITICAL VS. LITERARY**

The trajectory of gospel criticism, and indeed all of New Testament studies, in the last 200 years has been primarily based on a historical-critical model. By this I mean that the meaning of the text is integrally related to a reconstruction of the historical situation in which it gave rise. Thus the historical-critical model explores the resources available for the author, the cultural assumptions of the author and recipients, the available literary types upon which a text might have been modeled. The

methods and general approaches to this historical critical model are well known to students of the Bible – we as faculty introduce our students early in their coursework to the various “geschichtes” (criticisms) with which to approach the gospel texts: source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism and its variant composition criticism, and rhetorical criticism.

For the most part, these historical-critical methodologies focus on the world behind the text. Either they seek to identify the raw materials of the gospels, or the pervasive cultural forces which shaped ancient writers. Even when we turn to the point of the actual production of the texts from the raw materials, these historical critical methodologies often focus only on the author—either trying to understand the author’s particular patterns of behavior in reshaping the resources at his or her disposal, or even seeking to understand the individual evangelist’s intention. Often without thinking about it, the historical-critic works from Schleiermacher’s suggestion that the interpreter should seek to know the mind of the author even better than the author himself or herself knew it.

In the last fifty years or so, and especially in the last couple of decades, strong objections to the historical critical methods have been lodged. For these scholars, the emphasis on the pre-history and background of the gospels has overshadowed the text itself. The text itself, according to his objection, can function and be understood without reference to any knowledge of sources, or of the reliability of any historical traditions upon which it might be based. And in many circles of the academy the objections to the excessive attention to “background” issues have risen to a wholesale rejection of the historical critical method, and thus has created the second of our dichotomies: Either historical-critical or literary.<sup>10</sup>

The objections are based on very real concerns about both how much the interpreter can in fact

know and, more importantly, how important such historical reconstructions actually are. In the first place, the emphasis on source criticism often assumed that identifying a source was the same as finding the “meaning” of a text. In the cases of source and form criticism, the archeological task of digging down to the earliest representation of a given pericope is often considered the end product: the “early” form itself is the meaning of the text. We see this in much of the work of the Jesus Seminar – by identifying which sayings of Jesus are early, the scholar finds the “true” sayings which then become the primary object. Such an overemphasis on sources is like the history of religions approach to Christianity – it assumes that a genealogical identification “explains” the resultant form.

In contrast, however, we now find an alternative emphasis on the text as it stands.<sup>11</sup> In this view, the text is all we really have, and so reliance on “background” issues is set aside as either irrelevant or too susceptible to misreading. The text is either analyzed in terms of its own inherent rules and structures—as for instance both structuralism and narrative criticism tend to do, although in very different ways—or else the focus shifts to the response of the reader.

This emphasis on the text alone is based in part on a scepticism over how well we can ever come to know the intention of an author.<sup>12</sup> Certainly we must reject the bold approach of Schleiermacher, who thought one could get inside the head of the author. But many literary approaches reject out of hand any ability to understand the intentional thrust of a text, instead simply taking the act of reading as the only available option. Once the initial communicative impulse of the text is removed—the interaction between an author and the original intended readers—then the text can become simply a canvas upon which to inscribe various “meanings” or “readings,” each of which is equally valid. So various approaches, generally grouped together as ideological approaches, read the

text from feminist, lesbian, Marxist, African American perspectives. Each of these adds something to our appropriation of the text, but often there is little attention paid to understanding the text's original purpose and function. Which is to say that many of the approaches which have arisen from the literary skepticism of authorial intention are no longer hermeneutical; they often say more about the reader and the current culture than the original text or the initial communicative impulse that gave rise to the gospels.

What we find, then, are two divergent approaches to the gospels. On the one hand, the traditional historical critical model tends to valorize background issues that lie behind the text—the sources, culture, and even author's perspective and intention. And the meaning of the gospel that is developed by these exegetes can easily be the creation of the critic built from the pieces of background data. On the other hand, the literary critics tend to treat the text as an artifact that too easily becomes simply a template for modern perceptions.

Having painted the dichotomy rather starkly, indeed with overly broad brushes, let me assert that each of the approaches offers something significant to gospel scholarship. The historical critic reminds us that the text was produced in a certain historical situation—the product of an author, in a certain milieu, with a real intended audience. And the literary critic reminds us that what we are dealing with is an actual text which confronted the ancient reader, and still confronts the modern reader, and which was ultimately read and interpreted without reference to “sources” or psychologizing. Again, I would assert that the dichotomy is itself dangerous to gospel criticism and some attempt to bridge the two would be valuable to the field of gospel interpretation.

One beginning point in bridging the gap is to distinguish between the hermeneutical task and the

role of appropriation. The hermeneutical task, in which I am more interested, must take seriously the original communicative impulse of the text. Each text was written in order to inform, persuade, or shape opinions about the subject matter portrayed.

But literary criticism has much to offer the historical critic in the hermeneutical task as well. Simply finding backgrounds and sources does little to elucidate the texts as communicative vehicles. The exegete must take more seriously the role of the audience in the text. Texts were produced to be read, so attending to the dynamics of how readers—ancient and modern—appropriate texts is crucial. Narrative analysis and genre analysis are thus central to the hermeneutical task. So also is the rhetorical function. How do texts utilize cultural conventions and knowledge of previous texts to control the readers' reactions to the texts? This is both a historical question and a literary question. It focuses on the text as the primary raw material of exegesis, but necessarily draws on the historical reconstruction of the ancient world—including available sources, cultural preconceptions, and reader competencies—to ask how such texts might have been read.

#### **IV. DICHOTOMY #3: MODERNIST VS. POST MODERNIST**

A natural extension of the historical-critical versus literary dichotomy is the recent question of whether we approach the gospels from a modernist or post-modernist perspective. As I approach this issue, some provisional, if clearly inadequate, definitions are necessary to clarify how I will use these vague and over-worked terms in this essay. I am mindful that these definitions are problematic, but some clarification about what I mean by the terms seems crucial to pursue this dichotomy. And indeed I am aware that the concept of dichotomy is itself a modernist concept, thus undermining at the outset my attempt at bridging the gap.

Generally when one speaks of modernism in tension with post-modernism, what is in view is an Enlightenment approach to seeking knowledge, and the way that intangible concepts such as meaning (and the even more problematic concept of “truth”) can be apprehended and appropriated. In general, the modernist-Enlightenment position would posit, with respect to the gospels, that there is an objective meaning to each pericope and even each larger narrative unit that can be approached, and ideally, ascertained through a carefully controlled process of investigation. A first corollary to this idea is that the subjective perspective of the researcher is problematic for the process of investigation; only if the researcher can be sufficiently objective in the analysis will the real central meaning of a passage or narrative be able to be detected. A second corollary, and one that is central to the critique of the modernist position, is that language is itself objectively referential. That is to say, that words and phrases within a specific context refer to a single ascertainable idea – either an object or fact, or a universal concept.

A good example of the modernist approach to the gospels can be seen in Jülicher’s treatment of the parables.<sup>13</sup> He argued that the parables must have only a single focus, and that careful analysis could uncover that single focus—and discovering that focus would then also lead to identifying the earliest and essential Jesus material. What is problematic, first of all, is the assumption that there is a single identifiable meaning to each parable, which is to say that dual meanings, allusive language, plays on words, not to mention possible allegories—with all the possible ranges of multiple meanings they contain—are rejected out of hand. Also, this approach assumes that if identified, this “single meaning” is therefore original Jesus material, and hence the only appropriate meaning. And, of course, Jülicher presumes that the search for this single meaning is possible through careful objective analysis.

Post-modernism, in contrast to modernism, is far more aware of the involvement of the subject in the search and construction of meaningful statements. Put another way, the post-modern scholar is less sanguine about the possibility of anyone achieving a truly objective stance. There are a couple of corollaries to this perspective as well. First of all, since human enterprise is heavily mediated by the subject—the “I” of research, description, and writing—language itself is subjective, not objective. Which is to say that it always reflects points of view, often unspoken and below the surface. Secondly, because of the indeterminateness of language, there is rarely a “single” meaning to any discourse. Instead, the possibility of multiple, new, or polyvalent meanings of words, phrases and narratives must be considered. Texts then can often be seen as arising at the intersection of a variety of explicit and implicit ideas which are competing for attention, but which invariably problematize the task of interpretation.

Returning to the example of Jülicher’s parable research, how might we critique this from a post-modernist perspective? First of all, the emphasis on only one meaning would be very problematic, since within the cryptic parables of Jesus are embedded a variety of options for reading or hearing. Indeed, given the subjective nature of interpretation itself, based on the unique way language presents itself to the individual, there are undoubtedly a wide range of possible ways to understand the parables—and it is difficult to determine which reading should be normative.

So how does this affect us, then? On the one hand, the modernist approach has some advantages in that it tends to reduce the task of interpretation to key issues. It also tends to focus attention on the initial discourse of the author as having a primary focus. The modernist attitude toward objectivity is a useful heuristic tool to center the task of interpretation. But it is dangerous if taken too

seriously or used exclusively. On the other hand, the post-modern approach appropriately raises questions about the ability to ever achieve objectivity, since all language is mediated by the subjectivity of the author, reader, and interpreter. Because language is inherently open to many meanings, there may be more than one meaning, and more than one kind of meaning. But this post-modernist approach may open the door to ever-expanding and conflicting meanings. Without some reasonable limit on possible meanings, texts actually can become meaningless.

My own approach in this intersection of modernism and post-modernism has been to focus on the rhetorical quality of gospel language. For me, meanings are frequently imbedded in the dialogic nature of discourse.<sup>14</sup> I am interested in how the gospel author is engaged in a dialogue with his or her audience—attempting to persuade them and assuming certain competencies and shared presumptions—but I also see the author engaged in dialogue with former texts and ideas. This focus on the author's initial discourse situation is fairly modernist in its perspective. But in moving outside of the one meaning, and focusing on how meanings are negotiated rhetorically, and in allowing for levels of intertextual engagement with prior texts, both written and unwritten, I am informed by post-modern sensibilities.<sup>15</sup> But of course the dialogue of discourse is also open-ended: readers continue to be drawn into the original dialogue, and often bring new and surprising insights to the task.

My current approach attempts to bridge in a small way the modernist and post-modernist approaches. There are other ways, though, to recognize strengths in each of the methods, so that the sharp divide between these approaches is not seen as negative, but rather a positive step forward in the our scholarly discourse.

#### **V. DICHOTOMY #4: CRITICAL STANCE VS. FAITH PERSPECTIVE**

The final divide which often separates scholars on the gospels is the issue of the role that faith plays in the interpretation of scripture. This can be touched on fairly quickly and simply, given the foregoing discussion on post-modernism. One of the great gifts that the post-modern critique of scholarship has given to us is the recognition that all discourse is produced and received from a subjective perspective. Let me suggest that this affirms a place for faith within the scholarly discourse, not as an obscuring factor, but as one of the many subjective stances that are possible when approaching the scriptures.

The modernist approach toward “objectivity” often created the view that any faith concerns would necessarily cloud the intellectual apprehension of the meaning of a text. Within this view one must set aside faith—or at least bracket it out—in order to pursue the analytical task of interpretation. On the other hand, those who operate within a perspective which is grounded upon faith in Jesus Christ often believe that they have to reject critical evaluation of the gospel material, thus resulting in an often simplistic or facile evaluation of the scriptures.

When one approaches the gospels, it is clear that they are filled with faith language. The subject matter deals with Jesus Christ, the rhetorical aim is generally toward engendering faith, and the authors plainly wrote from a faith perspective. Bracketing out faith when dealing with such texts is difficult and tends resist the very aims of the texts. And attempting what is deemed to be objectivity often means either doubting the validity of the gospels’ message or rejecting the perspective of the author. In other words, the “objective” or critical stance has as many significant barriers to understanding and evaluating the documents as does a stance based upon a faith perspective. Each is a point of view, and in each case the interpretation is already guided by the values of the interpreter.

If, however, we openly recognize the subjective quality of all language—both on the part of the original writers and their audiences, as well as on our own part as modern interpreters—then a faithful perspective can also claim a place in the academy. A faith perspective is not a requirement for approaching the texts; a negative evaluation of the faith claims of the text does not invalidate the results of analysis. But neither is a faith perspective inherently a barrier to interpretation. What is necessary, though, is an honest appreciation for, and tacit claiming of, the preconceptions and values that guide one's thinking.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

We live in an exciting time in New Testament scholarship. The range of approaches to the study of the gospels is expanding as other fields of study and approaches increasingly are being brought to bear upon the texts. Sophisticated literary and rhetorical approaches, together with the rise of post-modern critiques of previously assumed norms of scholarship, are adding to our repertoire of ways to read and interpret the gospels. These can, and often are, viewed as great chasms—either/ors that divide scholars into competing camps. What I suggest instead is that we find ways to incorporate these multiple approaches, and allow gospel studies – and indeed all of biblical scholarship – to be challenged and enriched.

- <sup>1</sup>. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, tr. W. Montgomery (London: A. & C. Black, 1936), pp. 6 and 11.
- <sup>2</sup>. F. C. Baur, *Kritische Untersuchungen über die kanonischen Evangelien* (Tübingen: Verlag und Druck, 1847), p. 239 ff.
- <sup>3</sup>. These points are discussed at greater length in my paper “The Contribution to the Temple Cleansing by the Fourth Gospel”, *SBL Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 490-493.
- <sup>4</sup>. See, for instance, the collection of articles *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (NY: Crossroad, 1990).
- <sup>5</sup>. See, for instance, Martin Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judea in the First Century After Christ* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1989), as well as *Judaism and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).
- <sup>6</sup>. For a full discussion of the debate, see D. Moody Smith, *John Among the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992), soon to be released in a 2<sup>nd</sup> and updated edition.
- <sup>7</sup>. Percival Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).
- <sup>8</sup>. Mark Matson, *In Dialogue with Another Gospel? The Influence of the Fourth Gospel on the Passion Narrative of the Gospel of Luke* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2001).
- <sup>9</sup>. See J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1987); Klaus Berger, *Im Anfang war Johannes* (Stuttgart: Quell, 1997); Barbara Shellard, “The Relationship of Luke and John: A Fresh Look at an Old Problem,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 46 (1995): 71–98.
- <sup>10</sup>. Certainly this is the emphasis of Stephen Moore’s influential book, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
- <sup>11</sup>. This emphasis began with the New Criticism movement in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in literary critical circles, and was then taken up by biblical critics.
- <sup>12</sup>. Based in part on the influential essay “The Intentional Fallacy” by Willaim K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, pp. 3-18 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

- <sup>13</sup>. Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1910). See also Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 186.
- <sup>14</sup>. See for instance my paper on “Intertextuality and the Relationship Between John and the Synoptics” presented at this year’s SBL joint sections of Johannine Literature and the Synoptic Gospels. This paper can be referenced at [www.milligan.edu](http://www.milligan.edu).
- <sup>15</sup>. So, for instance, see the emphasis on “Intertextuality,” “Bakhtin,” and “Kristeva” in the *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A. K. M. Adam (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).