

Literary Criticism Of The Synoptic Gospels¹

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Introduction

The most recent development in gospel studies, growing out of the interaction of biblical studies with the liberal arts, is literary criticism; it is the purpose of this paper to introduce this new face on the block by defining, explaining and evaluating its usefulness for understanding the meaning of the Synoptic Gospels. Before we define "literary criticism" several introductory comments are in order.

It can be asserted fairly that literary criticism, as practiced in Synoptic studies, is a predictable child of redaction criticism, for in literary criticism one finds a *consistent and embracing concern with the text as it is*. If redaction criticism censured form and source criticism's preoccupation with stages *prior* to the text instead of the final text, then literary criticism consummates that concern of redaction criticism. But such a "birth" is not altogether natural because, whereas redaction criticism is a development of the tradition-critical process, literary criticism has no such direct relationship with the tradition-critical process. Thus, although the concerns of redaction criticism (in its compositional aspects) and those of literary criticism are often similar (the meaning of the final text), the heritages are so dissimilar that one must recognize a *paradigmatic revolution* in literary criticism. If redaction criticism emerged from the historical-critical concerns of gospel scholarship, literary criticism emerged from *anti-historical-critical* forces and the more recent phases of literary criticism found in the theoretical analysis of non-biblical literature, most especially, the examination of prose fiction.²

Further, one may be led by the preceding paragraph to think "literary criticism" is a unified, singular approach (even school) in gospel studies but this is not the case. In fact, the approaches often classed under the term "literary criticism" are quite diverse, including such methods as structuralism, rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, canon criticism, reader-response criticism, and even deconstructionism — each with its own history, concerns, methods, evangelists, administrative assistants and (most especially) jargon. Although a survey and evaluation of each of these

disciplines could prove useful, this paper is limited to the narrative concerns of literary criticism.

This makes for a final observation, namely, that, when we look at gospel literary...

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