Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 10

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Historical Criticism Continued

We’ve been looking at hermeneutics in biblical interpretation in the last session. We will look today at issues related to historical criticism. We said that hermeneutics both logically and historically moves through the three major phases of communication, that is: focusing on the author and historical matters and background matters that produce the text; then moving on to text centered approaches where meaning is found within the text and finally, on to reader center approaches where the reader is the primary one responsible for meaning and text and making sense of text.

But we have been looking at the first phase, that is, historical approaches, or historical criticism, and under that we said historical criticism is sort of an umbrella where under that is included a number of types of studies such as looking at the author, and the historical background of a book, the original readers and their circumstances, and specific historical references within the text.

But we also want to consider and just begin to consider the three other approaches that fall under the historical type approaches. The first one is source criticism that we introduced very briefly in the last session. We said source criticism is a methodology that attempts to get behind the text and uncover the written sources or documents that authors utilize in their own compositions. We looked at one text in particular Luke chapter 1 verses 1-4 where the author clearly seems to be reliant on previous written sources. To some degree we know the examples in the Old Testament where the narrators rely on and even explicitly indicate their reliance on sources of written sources, even if those sources are no longer available. But because of that source criticism developed as an attempt to uncover or reconstruct the possible sources that lie behind the Old and New Testament documents as we have them.

So the assumption is that biblical authors rely on historical sources and on different written sources for their own composition. We will utilize or to give a couple of
examples from the Old and New Testament of source criticism and how it developed and how it work and perhaps give an evaluation of the method.

**Old Testament Source Criticism: Kings/Chronicles**

First of all in the Old Testament we have considered already and mentioned already the book of Chronicles when we discussed the fact that later Old Testament authors sometimes pick up on earlier Old Testament writings and re-interpret them and re-assert them for their own readership. 1 and 2 Chronicles seems them to take up material from 1 and 2 Kings as a source and the author uses it for his own purposes. But 1 and 2 Kings seems to be a source that the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles draws upon for his own writings.

For example, one you have compared one text that we’ll talk about later as well but when you note 1 and 2 Chronicles and the relationship also to another document or another, especially 1 Chronicles in chapter 17 starting with verse 10 “I declare to you that the Lord will build a house for you when your days are over and you go to be with your fathers I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for me and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father and he will be my son. I will never take my love from him as I took it away from his predecessor from my house and my kingdom forever his throne will be established forever.” Then verse 15 concludes by saying “Nathan reported to David all the words of this entire revelation” you probably recognize that language that I just read from another text and that is 2 Samuel 7. In 2 Samuel 7:14 in the verses that precede that 2 Samuel 7:14 is part of the covenant that God makes with David speaking through the prophet Nathan.

But if you go back and read both texts together, the 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17, you will note that the words in many places are virtually identical and very similar. So that most likely means one of the books functions as a source for the other one. One of the authors has drawn on the other as a source for his own composition, but we will pick this text up again to demonstrate and this gets into one of the other methods known as redaction criticism. The authors though when they utilize the sources they use them for
their own purposes and their own intentions. A later method, redaction criticism, asks the question how has the author taken up the source? How has the author of Chronicles taken up his sources and now use them for his own purposes and for his own intentions? The point here is to demonstrate that because of the similarity of wording and even content obviously biblical authors take up and utilize earlier sources, even earlier biblical sources, in their own composition.

**Genesis 1 and 2 and the JEDP theory**

Perhaps the classic example in Old Testament studies comes from the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2 and could be extended to include the entire Pentateuch the first five books of the Old Testament. Genesis 1 and 2 is an account of two different creation narratives, two different creation stories and what is intriguing in the back to back stories that are very similar yet they also reveal distinct differences. For example, in chapters 1 and 2 some scholars have noted the difference in style or the difference in order in the way that the different parts of creation are recorded. They have also noted the different names used for God in chapter 1 and 2 and because of that earlier on when in the hay-day of source criticism and still today you sometimes find this going on is Old Testament scholars are convinced that they can isolate two separate sources behind Genesis 1 and 2 and the different accounts of the creation narratives and then a later author has taken these two sources and has put them together into his own account. Again this insight has been extended over the entire Pentateuch.

You may have heard the well-know JEPD theory. Those letters JEDP are letters meant to kind of label four separate sources that existed behind the entire Pentateuch. For example, Jehovah being the first name of Yahweh and their was presumably an author that wrote especially using the name of Yahweh who wrote a source from a certain perspective. The letter D stands for Deuteronomic perspective that someone writing developed the book of Deuteronomy composed parts of the Pentateuch. The point is historically you have four separate sources that were written by authors and scholars have labeled those the J [Jehovah] source, the D source, the E [Elohim] source and the P source. The P source expressed a priestly perspective for example. Scholars have been
convinced that they can isolate four separates sources and have even gone further and
dated them and provided a setting for the original composition of the sources but now
much later an author has taken these four separate sources and welded them together into
what we have is the final form that we called the Pentateuch.

Although I don’t subscribe to this necessarily, my purpose is not to evaluate this
but obviously you can begin to see the questions that might arise. By what criteria do we
isolate sources and interestingly some of the criteria that previously scholars used to
isolate sources are used by others to demonstrate the unity of the text. Also sometimes it
appears to border speculation to begin to reconstruct a hypothetical date and hypothetical
community or situation that gave rise to the source. My main purpose is just to
demonstrate how source criticism has been used in trying to isolate underlying written
sources that a later author has now picked up again sometimes in a book like Chronicles,
and Kings and Samuel, there does seem to be a definite relationship between the
documents. One seems to have functioned as source of the editor. When it comes to the
Pentateuch though this is more hypothetical no one has access to the existence of JED or
P unlike the fact that we have 1 and 2 Kings and Samuel and Chronicles or we have
references within kings of the author explicitly appealing to “the annals of the Kings of
Judah” or something like that.

Source criticism played a significant role in Old Testament scholarship in isolating
and analyzing and reconstructing the underlying sources of the Old Testament text. You
can also begin to see that however much value this may have had this source criticism did
give way to the method that we mentioned a little bit earlier, redaction criticism that
focuses more on, not so much reconstruction sources, but the fact that we must deal with
the text as we have it. What we have is the entire Pentateuch so one must ultimately deal
with that text rather than the hypothetical sources that can be isolated or analyzed that
seem to now be included in the final composition.

**New Testament Source Criticism**

In the New Testament the classic example of source criticism is probably the
Synoptic Gospels, the first three Gospels; Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The reason for that
is very similar to Kings, Chronicles, and Samuel. The first three gospels in particular, though John is very different in some of the material it contains, than the wording and the language that is used at the first three gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem to indicate some type of relationship between the three, however we explain that, so when you look at Matthew, Mark, and Luke you notice that there is not only a similarity in content as far as the events of the life of Christ and the sayings and teachings of Jesus but they occur in a roughly similar order, sometimes in an identical order.

But even beyond that when you start comparing Matthew, Mark, and Luke the wording is virtually identical in places and to such a degree that if any of my students produced papers, research papers that agreed in order and wording to the same extent that the Synoptic Gospels do I would suspect some type of collaboration and some type of borrowing. One of the students must have borrowed from another or perhaps they both borrowed from a similar document or similar prior research paper.

To give you but one exam ple in the Synoptic Gospels are full of these. In Matthew chapter 3 and 7 and 9 we will compare a text from Matthew chapter 3 and Luke chapter 3 as well. In Matthew chapter 3 and I wanted to read verses 7 through 10. Matthew 3:7-10: “But when he saw rabbi’s and Sadducees coming to him, coming to where he was, he [that is, John the Baptist] said to them, “You brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the coming wrath. Produce fruit in keeping from repentance and do not think you can say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father. I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees and every tree that does produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” Now listen to Luke chapter 3:7-9: “John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized, ‘You brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the coming wrath. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father, for I tell you that out of these stone God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already laid at the root of the tree. For every tree that is not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’” In both of those you have John the Baptist speaking to the Pharisees.
Note that assuming that the English translation that I just read captures the Greek text in both cases note that the wording was identical. Not only in the words quoted but in even some of the narrative itself. Now when scholars have read something like that it raises the question: How do we explain that, how do we explain the similarities of between Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Again John is very different but in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, how do we explain the difference? It is not by the fact they just record the same events and in the same order at the times but the wording is nearly identical. How is that supposed to be explained?

Most New Testament students have tried to explain that it is due to some kind of relationship that either, for example, one explanation is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke probably had access to the same source or the same oral tradition. That is, they are all three relying on the same body of information that has been passed down to them. That’s one possibility however the fact that the wording is so close has led scholars to posit a literary relationship between the three. Sometimes we talked about the Fundamentalists view of inspiration of several sessions ago. Some would say it’s only because they were inspired that they all three write similarly. The problem is that does not account some of the differences that one finds between Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

So how do we explain this? The most popular view is a source critical one. That is, the one of the Synoptics--Matthew, Mark, or Luke--function as the source for the other two. Two of the Gospel writers are borrowing for the other one.

That has given rise to a number of theories that I don’t intend to go into a lot of detail. But a very popular one early on that goes all the way back to Augustine and is still argued for by some today is that Matthew was written first and then Luke and Mark borrowed from Matthew or utilized Matthew as their source. Now obviously especially Luke has a lot of material that is not in Matthew and Mark has a little bit of material that is not in Matthew. Luke has a lot of material that you don’t find in Mark. So, obviously, Luke added in a lot of information. If you go back to Luke 1:1-4 where he is aware of eyewitness accounts and other documents, Luke obviously includes some of his own
material that is not in Matthew or Mark, but that was very common explanation. Matthew wrote first, Mark and Luke utilized Matthew.

There have been some other theories as well but what I want to focus on just briefly is the most common explanation that probably most New Testament scholars and students hold to that is what is known as “Markan priority.” That is the Gospel of Mark would have been the first one written and Matthew and Luke would have both utilized Mark independently of each other. One would picture Mathew and Luke sitting together utilizing Mark. Matthew and Luke would have had a copy of Mark and would have used that Gospel as the basis for their own. Again, you find Matthew and Luke including a lot of information not in Mark, Matthew has a lot of parables that you don’t find anywhere in Mark, Luke has a lot of number of parables that you don’t find in Mark or Matthew. Both Matthew and Luke have the Sermon on the Mount, but you don’t find that anywhere in Mark. So the theory is that Matthew and Luke both used Mark but also included other material that according to Luke may have come from other written documents and sources and probably came from eyewitness testimonies as well. If the author of Matthew was Matthew, Jesus’ disciple, then no doubt Matthew would have seen many of these events himself and witnessed them himself. So, most agree then that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke utilized Mark.

A couple of the reasons for that is that when you compare the three most of Gospel of Mark, almost all of it, appears in both Matthew and Luke. If you assume that Matthew is written first, then Mark would have ended up deleting material out of Matthew because Matthew is quite a bit longer and includes a lot more material. So do you see if Matthew was written first and Mark utilized Matthew or Luke, then he must have left out a lot of material. If Mark was written first then it stands to reason that most of Mark, not all of it, but most of it, would be picked up in Matthew and Luke. That is one of the arguments for the priority of Mark.

A couple of other arguments is Matthew and Luke at times appear to be smoother than Mark, where Mark might be a little shorter or rougher in grammar or in the way he records things. Matthew and Luke appear to be smoother. The suggestion is that it is
more likely that Matthew and Luke would have smoothed out places in Mark that they thought were rough. Sometimes it appears that Matthew and Luke are clearer theologically, that is, some areas where Mark might say something could be misunderstood theologically regarding Christ’s deity or the person of Christ; Matthew and Luke appear to smooth that out. Matthew and Luke almost never when they’re both referring to Mark, or when they both parallel Mark never seem to deviate from that or from each other, in the way they refer to Mark. Again my purpose is not to mount an argument, but simply demonstrate why some scholars think that has emerged as probably the most common view as the relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke is a source critical view that posits Mark as the original source. Mark is the first Gospel written and functioned as a source for Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke would have then had access to Mark and utilized most of Mark in the production of their own Gospels. Again they both had access to other material and other sources through eye witness accounts. Tradition has it Mathew, the Gospel of Matthew, was indeed written by Matthew the disciple of Jesus. Just one important side: the titles given to the Gospel, the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, and Gospel of Luke; those were not originally part of the documents, those were added later on by the church as an attempt to identify who the authors of those Gospels were. If those were reliable and you can make a good case that they are, then again Matthew would have drawn his own eyewitness experience of Jesus life and Jesus teachings. They would have access to other material that they would have included.

**Q Source**

One other interesting point to say just to fill out the picture so if you see this terminology you know what it’s doing is, you will often find New Testament students referring to Q, the Q source. Q is simply the first letter of the German word for “source,” and it is a word used to describe the material used by Matthew and Luke have in common with each other but not in Mark. For example, both Matthew and Luke have an account of Jesus’ birth but you don’t find it in Mark. Mark jumps right into John the Baptist and into Jesus’ early ministry. Both Matthew and Luke have an account of the birth and very
early childhood of Christ. Luke has a little more than Matthew does Jesus’ very early childhood. Both Matthew and Luke have an account of the Sermon on the Mount, Mark does not and sometimes that material is very close in wording. So many New Testament scholars think that Matthew and Luke also had access to another source that they have labeled Q. So Matthew and Luke used Mark but they also had access, according to this theory, to another document. Some would say it’s a document others would say we don’t know if it is a document or not but still the letter Q stands for the material that Mathew and Luke have such as the Sermon on the Mount that you don’t find in Mark. So Q would be a more hypothetical source that they think Matthew and Luke had access to.

But based on all of this again most would conclude that Mark was the first Gospel written and then Matthew and Luke utilize Mark, but also other material, perhaps this Q whatever it is, whether it is a specific document or a body of teaching. It is information that both Matthew and Luke had access to and then utilized in their own teaching.

Again, sometimes scholars get a little creative by suggesting a community that created Q and a situation is even located geographically where it may have even come from and the theology of Q and the situation it was addressing, which kind of piles speculation upon speculation. We are not even sure that Q was an actual document or not so that sometimes this kind of thing can run rampant. But the Synoptic Gospels as I just explained, seems to have been the primary beginning point and entry point of source criticism into the New Testament and that’s again because of the similarity between the Synoptic Gospels. It required an explanation and most are convinced that there is a literally relationship with one of them providing the source for the others. The most common explanation is that Mark was written first and was the source for the other gospels.

**Source Criticism outside the Synoptics**

Source criticism though has actually, spread outside of just the Synoptic Gospels, although sometimes when you read treatments of New Testament source criticism that is the only place that can happen is in the Synoptic Gospels. I have read a number of articles on source criticism that don’t talk about source criticism outside of the Synoptics,
Mathew, Mark, and Luke; but others have ranged more broadly and suggested that other New Testament authors may be reliant on sources. So, for example, some have examples that in Paul’s epistles at times he may also be using pre-existing sources or material.

Two of the most prominent and well know examples, though debated, occur in two of Paul’s letters, one of them Colossians and the other Philippians. I will read the more common one perhaps from Philippians 2. Philippians 2 right in the middle of the chapter contains this well know Christ hymn, where Paul says “where being in the very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in the appearance of a man he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the father.” Now interestingly even in the English translation that I am looking at, although not all translations do this, but the English translation I am looking at, sets these verses up in sort of poetic fashion. In verse form and some perhaps reflecting the fact that some think Paul may the quoting a pre-existing hymn. Some are convinced that Paul wrote this himself, but others think that Paul may be utilizing a hymn that was already circulating as a hymn in the early church.

The other text the other classical text is Colossians 1:15-20, that I will not read now. It is the other well-known Christ hymn, that some speculate may be an early hymn that Paul himself is quoting, one that was utilized by the church and circulated in the early church and now Paul uses it as a source for his own composition. Again it is difficult to tell and scholars debate whether or not that is indeed the case.

The other possible source or another example of a possible source critical issue in the New Testament is the relationship between 2 Peter and Jude. When you read 2 Peter and Jude it becomes clear that they contain material that is very similar almost to the same extent that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are similar in both order and content but also wording. So there’s been debate as to what might be the relationship, for example,
between 2 Peter and Jude. One common theory is that Jude was written first and the author of 2 Peter then utilized the material in Jude in his own composition, but it also included other material. Again most think that because most of Jude is consumed in and taken up in 2 Peter. So they think that it is more likely that 2 Peter would use Jude as he uses almost all of it than that Jude would use 2 Peter and leave a lot of it out. So source criticism goes beyond merely the Synoptics but other scholars have explored the possibility of written sources behind other parts of New Testament text.

1 Peter 3

One final example in the New Testament that might be fruitful for source criticism as far as its ability to reveal interpretive insight is one of the more difficult passages in the New Testament, and again my purpose is not to solve it or provide a detailed explanation. The one passage in 1 Peter chapter 3, at the very end of chapter 3, starting in verse 18: “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body, but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water.” And I will stop right there. That passage has caused a number of New Testament students to pull their hair and try to explain what is going on and exactly what Peter is doing. One explanation that has been given is that the author of 1 Peter is drawing on the apocalyptic works like Revelation and Daniel but one apocalyptic work in particular that seems to have been well known, though it is not included in Scripture, and again an apocalyptic work being a visionary a narrative account of someone’s vision, someone ascends to heaven and sees heavenly visions, a prediction of the future in highly symbolic language; one of the well-known apocalypses that is not in the Old or New Testaments was the book of the 1 Enoch. In the Enoch literature you find a number of references to the story of Genesis chapter 6; the story of the flood that begins describing the “sons of God” that cohabit with “the daughters of men.” In 1 Enoch that is understood to be angelic beings that left their place of authority and now they are pictured, because of what the angelic beings did in Genesis 6 in the
days of Noah, they are now pictured as being imprisoned in darkness and awaiting the
day of judgment. Some would say that that is the source or the background for what we
read in this text that I read from 1 Peter chapter 3. Some would suggest that Peter had
access to 1 Enoch in his telling and interpretation of the story of Genesis 6. So what that
means then interpretively is we wouldn’t have to worry to much as to what is going on in
this text and where all these things are taking place but according to this explanation
Peter may just be drawing on a common apocalyptic account or story in order to
demonstrate Jesus victory over the power of evil.

Again my purpose is not to adjudicate an interpretation but simply to give an
example of how source criticism in how one reads the text and to demonstrate how
source criticism is used in the New Testament outside of only the Synoptic Gospels.

Source Criticism: an evaluation

Again, two observations by way of evaluation is one I have already mentioned.
One of the dangers in source criticism is the way some interpreters use it. At times the
approach can be speculative, especially when we don’t have the sources available,
especially when we are trying to reconstruct it. It might be a little bit easier in writings
like the Synoptic Gospels although even there we have to be careful as far as placing to
much weight on any theory of relationship. It appears certain that one of the Gospels
functioned as a source for the others. On the other hand, when we don’t have the sources
available sometimes it can be speculative to suggest that the writer was drawing on as a
source and made this or that change or even to go into details as to where that source may
have come from, the date, the setting, the theology of that source.

That is related to my second observation. At the end of the day we still have to
deal with the text as we have it. Even if New Testament and Old Testament authors were
reliant on previous sources which they were and however much an understanding and
reconstruction of those sources may help us understand what is going on, such as I think
the 1 Peter 3 text is a good example of that. At the same time we still have to deal with
the final text. An author has taken those sources and put them in the form of a text to
communicate his purpose that now starts to get us into another criticism, that is, redaction
criticism that begins to focus more on the final text rather than the sources and what the author has done in putting them together. So sometimes source criticism can be a great help in identifying the sources that may have contributed to the author’s own composition and understand how the author has used those. On the other hand, we must avoid speculation and we must ultimately focus on the text as it stands.

**Form Criticism: Introduction**

Now source criticism historically especially in New Testament studies, historically and logically source criticism gave way to or gave a place to the emergence of another form of criticism known as “Form Criticism.” Basically, form criticism is like source criticism, an attempt to at least partially to get behind the written documents of the New and Old Testaments, to recover and uncover the individual forms, especially oral forms, that have made their way into the final composition. So what form criticism often does is it looks at the documents and looks at forms and tries to isolate, based on oral history, where did this form develop? Looking at individual units in the text individual forms given what I find I can determine of the setting of that form and how that form developed that now results in what I find in the Old and New Testament texts. So you can see form criticism often has different facets. It can study the individual forms and the texts of individual units and their form and their shape and their function. It can study the original setting of that form and its oral tradition and its development up until the time it was written and it was included in the text. That’s why I say form criticism also is in some respects a historical endeavor and it often tries to uncover the oral period of the forms transmission up until the time it was included in the written text, as we are going to see though probably the most fruitful aspect of form criticism is to isolate, not isolate, but to identify the individual units and forms within texts and what they are. How do they function? How do they make a difference in interpretation? But let me give you some examples again from both the Old and New Testaments as far as form criticism and how it works. My goal is not always to necessarily that I agree with these examples or to evaluate them but just to demonstrate how form criticism can work.
Old Testament Form Criticism

In the Old Testament form criticism developed most prominently in the Psalms, where a German scholar called Herman Gunkel was able to identify certain forms of the psalms, and classify them and discuss their setting and their function and things like that. One common approach to form criticism in the old testament and actually there is a number of interesting and, in fact, helpful commentaries called the Form of Old Testament Literature that follow an approach of identifying forms, that is, looking at the structure of the form how it is put together and how it is structured. It looks at the genre that can label the form, what kind of form is this? Then looking at the possible settings of the form, what setting would have given rise to a form like this? We will give an example in just a moment. What is the function or intention of this form?

For example, a common form that we use in the United States, and I’m sure this is true elsewhere also, is the grocery list. I will look at four features. If I take a grocery list, what is the structure of it? The grocery list has a unique structure; it doesn’t include narrative or explanation. It usually is simply just a list of items that may have very limited explanation. It is just a list of items with very little grammar with no prose or narratives. It is just a simple list with not very long items. The genre then of such a structure would be a grocery list. That would be the label, the genre label that we give to this kind of form. That simply gives a list of items that one would purchase at a grocery store, especially food items. The third thing is the setting of a grocery list. It seems to me its setting is preparation for going to the grocery store. As I am going to the grocery store I will create a list, so the setting is a trip to the grocery store to purchase groceries for the coming week or month or whatever. Finally, the intention is simply to remind me what to purchase when I get to the store. So similarly forms can be treated like are examined like that even in the Old and New Testaments.

Psalms and Form Criticism

So, for example, for the psalms it’s nothing new that there are different types of psalms even at the very basic level you learn that there are psalms of praise, psalms of lament etc. etc. These psalms all emerge within the worship life of the nation of Israel
and are utilized in various settings. A common psalm is a lament. A psalm of lament has a very common structure. Most of them have a common structure, beginning with 1) an invocation to God, 2) the lament itself which is basically a description of how bad things are or have gotten, then 3) is an expression of confidence of the psalmist, 4) a petition and then 5) often ending in a vow where the psalmist, makes a promise to God for answering his prayer.

Another interesting type of Psalm is what is known as the entrance psalms, there is an example of that in Psalm 15. Again, there are a number of those. Psalm 15 provides and interesting example it begins “Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary, who may live in your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless, and he who does what is righteous, and speaks the truth from his heart, and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong, and casts no slur on his fellow man, who despises a vile man, but honors those who fears the Lord, who keeps an oath even when it hurts, who lends his money without usury, and does not accept bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.” Notice how this psalm is structured, begins with a question by the worshiper in number one: “Lord who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live in your holy hill?” And then the rest of the Psalm 15:2-5 is an answer to that question in the form of stipulations for entrance into the sanctuary and entrance onto God’s holy hill. The setting for this then may be the actual arrival at the temple as they came to worship God. So the intention then would be to stipulate the requirements for those who would approach the temple in order to participate in worship.

**Call Narratives**

Another common form you find in order to move outside of the Psalms but you find this particularly in prophetic literature is what is known as an Old Testament “Call Narratives,” which you find particularly at the beginning of some of the prophets. There is another intriguing example in the early chapters of Exodus in the life of Moses. A prophetic call narrative basically was an account of God appearing to and confronting an individual in Israel’s history, a prophet or someone like Moses, commissioning them and calling them for service. It took on an interesting and there seems to be a common,
structure when you start comparing the call narratives. When you start comparing Isaiah chapter 6, you find another one in Ezekiel chapter 1 and 3 and you also find one in the first three chapter of the book of Exodus as well. God appears to individuals and calls and commissions them for service.

Now this structure of the Old Testament call narratives seems to include most of the following. Number one: a confrontation with God, where God would confront and God would appear to the person. The second one would be the commission of God where God actually commissions or calls the prophet or person for a certain activity or service. This is followed by number 3: the objection of the prophet. So, you remember Isaiah, “Woe to me, I am a person of unclean lips.” There is an even more extensive one in the Exodus account when God commissions Moses. He comes up with a series of responses, a series of objections, not just one. The objections then are followed by an assurance by God, which is number 4, that over comes the objection. Then number 5 is a sign is given.

Especially Moses’ call in Exodus 1-3 includes all of those. What is interesting then, this suggests Moses commission is the commission of a prophet. Moses is being seen as a prophet who is now being called and commissioned by God. The setting then perhaps would be the ancient requirement for messengers to show their credentials. Then the intention of the prophetic call narrative would be authenticate the prophetic message and activities, everything that Moses does and says, everything the Isaiah says, or everything the Ezekiel does, now receives the validation or now receives authenticity because it goes back to a call narrative and a commission by God.

So those are examples of how form criticism can work in a number of Old Testament texts by identifying the discrete forms and looking at their structure, what the genre or the form, what their original setting might have been that might have given rise to such a form, and then the function or intention of those forms can be illuminating when we look at or try to understand biblical text.

**New Testament Form Criticism**

In the new testament form criticism seems to have developed a little bit differently than it did in the Old Testament but also form criticism in the New Testament usually
was associated or had three facets. Form criticism in the New Testament, much like source criticism developed first of all in the Gospels, especially in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in the Synoptic Gospels. Form criticism was often more closely tied with issues of historicity, the historicity of the Gospels, the historicity of saying of Jesus, and the things that he did.

But in the Gospels form criticism included especially it started three different facets. Number one form criticism focused on the forms, the discrete forms, that one finds in the Gospels and scholars would then label the different forms. They would create labels such as a pronouncement story, a story told about something that Jesus did or said that climax with a saying or pronouncement. Miracle stories, or sayings of Jesus, or prophecies, or proverbial sayings, or discourses, those were all typical labels given to different forms found throughout the Gospels. The first stage of form criticism was to locate and identify and label the different forms found in the Gospels.

For example, in Mark chapter 2 verse 15-17 “While Jesus was having dinner at Levi house, many tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the ‘sinners’ and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ On hearing this Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but the sinners.’” The scholars usually classify this as an example of a pronouncement story. Notice this brief story that ends with a pronouncement or a saying or Jesus. Usually with this form the focus becomes on the saying that climaxes the story. So the first goal of form criticism in the New Testament, especially in the gospels was to identify and label the different forms.

The second feature of form criticism was to identify the *sitz im leben*, which is the German term meaning “the setting in life.” The setting that gave rise to the form and usually the setting was something in the life of the early church. What situation in the life of the early church would have given rise to this form, would have created this form? The assumption is this form was useful for something; the assumption is the authors were not
just writing bear history. But the forms demonstrate that this literature was useful for something in the life of the early church. So the attempt was to not only identify and label the form but also to identify the setting, that it is something in the life of the early church whether its form of worship or whether its conflict with false teaching or with Judaism, or with some setting with the church or the teaching of the church that gave rise to this form.

Then, finally, the third or final element was the history of transmission. That is, the oral stage of this form would have risen in some setting of the early church, but then it would have been passed along orally, up until the time that it gets included in the biblical text. So then form criticism studies this oral stage. It studies the changes that are made in the development of this form up until the inclusion in the biblical text. It traces the transmission of these forms. Out of these three for biblical interpretation and hermeneutics the most fruitful of these three has been number one: the ability to identify the form and to not just label for the sake of labeling, but to identify the form in a way that is helpful for interpretation and for understanding the biblical text. For example, if I identify something as a pronouncement story, the focus of my interpretation will be on the climactic saying that will be the punch line or the main point.

Another interesting facet of identifying form criticism is it helps us to make sense of larger sections of biblical text. For example, in Matthew chapters 8 and 9, it seems to be a lengthy section that has been arranged not so much chronologically according to the order in which the events occur but chapter 8 and 9 seem to be arranged based on a common form that is miracle stories. All of Matthew chapter 8 and 9 is simply a series of miracle stories so that form criticism seems to provide the rational of how Matthew 8 and 9 have been arranged.

In the next session I will continue to discuss form criticism just briefly as we will wrap that up and look at an example of the parables and the Gospels and how that form criticism might help us come to grips with how the parables function and how we could read them. Then we will move on to the third form of criticism in this triad that has historically and logically developed and that is redaction criticism.