REL 223 Module 7 Lecture Notes

Jesus and Modern Scholarship

Modern Biblical Scholarship

For much of history, Christians viewed the gospels like newspaper reports, relating specific detailed facts about Jesus. Several hundred years ago, Christians began to ask questions about the Bible that we might ask about any document like: When were the biblical books written? Were they written all at once by one person, or were they written over a period of time by multiple authors? Why were they written? What were their agendas? Who were their original audience? What genres or types of literature were used? How do these genres dictate the author’s intended meaning? What sources did the authors use? How did they edit their sources? What literary techniques did they use?

Historical-Critical Method

This approach is called the “historical-critical” method. The word “critical” here does not mean “criticizing.” It comes from the Greek word “krisis,” which means “judgment.” So “historical-critical” simply means “making historical judgments;” offering answers to questions about the origins of the biblical books. The historical-critical method has also been used to study the scriptures of other religions. In this presentation, we’ll summarize some of the findings of historical-critical scholarship regarding Jesus in the New Testament.

The Letters of Paul

Paul’s letters are the earliest New Testament documents, pre-dating the gospels by at least twenty years. Paul focused almost exclusively on Jesus’ death and resurrection, which are the means by which God saves both Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) from the evil forces of sin, death, and the devil. Paul rarely mentions Jesus’ teachings or the events of his life.

Authorship of the Gospels

The earliest copies of the gospels do not have the titles, like “according to Matthew.” They were all anonymous. Scholars have found oral and written sources behind the gospels. Matthew and Luke both used Mark as one of their chief sources. The gospels reflect situations, persons, and events existing only decades after Jesus. The gospels were written by educated persons. Jesus’ disciples were fishermen who could not read or write. For these and other reasons, scholars are certain that the gospels were written at least forty years after Jesus, and not by original disciples of Jesus.

Ancient Histories and Biographies

Ancient histories and biographies were, first, more concerned with meaning than fact. Secondly, involved much creative work on the part of the author or authors. And third, are very different from modern histories and biographies.

A close look at the gospels reveal differences that cannot be reconciled if we take the gospels as literal, blow-by-blow, descriptions of events. The tendency has been to either try to impose an awkward harmony, or to simply ignore, these differences. Modern scholarship has discovered that ancient biographies and history-writing were very different from modern biographies and history books. The ancients realized that there is no such thing as detached, objective history writing, but that all histories have a "take" or "spin" on the events. There was also much more creative work on the part of the author. This was not criticized, but expected.

Centuries before Jesus, Thucydides, an ancient Greek historian, admitted that he composed the speeches in his history books. Neither he nor his readers had any problem with this. Thus the original readers of the gospels did not expect them to align in every detail. The early Christians who included the
four gospels side-by-side in the canon were aware of these differences, but they didn’t change them. These differences often bother us because we have a different understanding of what history and biography writing should look like. Despite many similarities, the gospels present different portraits of Jesus. These portraits were largely determined by the audiences and agendas of the original gospel writers.

**The Synoptic Problem and Mark Priority**

Most scholars hold that The Gospel of Mark was the first and that Matthew and Luke used Mark because Mark’s gospel is the shortest, and also the earliest. Frequently when Mark, Matthew, and Luke all contain the same passage, Mark and Matthew will agree against Luke, or Mark and Luke will agree against Matthew. Matthew and Luke’s versions of stories in Mark are also shortened. For these reasons, scholars conclude, Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a primary source.

**The Gospel of Mark**

Mark was written during the Jewish Revolt against Rome in AD 65 – 70. Mark’s audience was Gentile or non-Jewish converts to Christianity. At the time they were not accepted by the original Jewish Christians. They were considered traitors by their own countrymen, the Romans. Internal evidence indicates that Mark’s audience was experiencing persecution, and perhaps even martyrdom. Therefore Mark presents Jesus as the “hidden Messiah” misunderstood by everyone: his enemies, friends, and his family. Only God, the evils spirits, the narrator, and the reader, know Jesus’ true identity in Mark. It is not until Jesus dies on the cross, that a Roman soldier confesses that Jesus is the Son of God (Mark 15:39). Mark also uses Jewish apocalyptic theology to portray Jesus. In this theology, God’s people are suffering, misunderstood and persecuted now, but will be vindicated by God by resurrection in the coming age. Jesus’ resurrection at the end of Mark, signifies divine vindication. Mark’s portrayal of Jesus as suffering, misunderstood, persecuted, and killed is due to the situation of Mark’s audience. Followers of Jesus must, like Jesus, suffer misunderstanding and persecution. But they, like Jesus, will be vindicated by God in the end.

**The Gospel of Matthew**

Matthew was written in the AD 80s for Jewish Christians who at least partially kept the Law of Moses. For this reason, at various points in Matthew, Jesus advocates keeping the Law and Jewish practices. The context was the expulsion of Jewish Christians from the broader non-Christian Jewish communities after the failed Jewish revolt against Rome, again which was around AD 65 – 70. The author used Mark and other sources, editing them for his own purposes and audience.

Matthew’s portrait includes Jesus as the Messiah predicted in the Jewish Scriptures, and Jesus as the “New Moses,” with direct parallels between Jesus and Moses. Matthew is also concerned with the leadership, structure, and authority of the early church as a community now independent from the synagogues. Matthew removes Mark’s negative portrayal of Jesus’ disciples, in order to buttress his claim that divine authority lies with the new Christian Church, and not with the Jewish synagogues. Peter plays prominently in Matthew in this regard. After Jesus calms the storm and gets into the boat in Mark, Jesus’ disciples: “were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; and their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:51 – 52). Matthew’s version of the same event, copied and edited from Mark, reads: “Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’.” (Matthew 14:43). Matthew’s version also includes a story about Peter walking on the water. Matthew’s portrait of Jesus, themes, and edits of Mark are determined by Matthew’s original audiences, and purposes in writing.
The Gospel of Luke

Luke’s gospel is part of a two-part work that includes the Acts of the Apostles, written in the AD 90s. Luke’s gospel has the most sophisticated writing style and is more complex than Mark and Matthew. Like Matthew, Luke used Mark as a primary source but edited it according to his audience and purpose. Luke’s portrait of Jesus contains multiple intertwined and related themes.

Luke is the only gospel writer to refer to the rulers and events of the Roman Empire. A prominent theme in Luke and Acts is that both Jesus and early Christians were innocent of any political and social crimes again Rome. Instead of Mark’s centurion confessing Jesus as the Son of God, when Jesus dies in Luke, the centurion says: “Truly this man was innocent” (Luke 23:47). Luke also has one of the criminals crucified with Jesus defend him as innocent (Luke 23:39 – 43), while Mark and Matthew, they both reviled Jesus (Mark 15:32; Matthew 27:44). Thus one of Luke’s intentions was to present a defense for Christianity to the broader Roman establishment.

Luke also avoids portraying Jesus’ death as a sacrifice for our sins. This is because the Romans misunderstood the teachings of Christianity. We have Roman documents wrongly accusing Christians of human sacrifice and of killing children (infanticide). As outsiders, they misunderstood the Christian teaching, that Jesus the son of God was sacrificed for sins. Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the true King of Israel, the promised Messiah. Luke portrays Jesus in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. Throughout Luke and Acts, Jesus is referred to as prophet and is paralleled to great prophets like Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha. Along with the prophetic theme, Luke presents Jesus as very concerned with social justice issues, such as reversing power between the rich and poor, men and women, and privileged and minorities. Women feature prominently and more positively in Luke, compared to the other gospels. Only Luke says that women supported Jesus and his disciples financially (Luke 8:1 – 3). Because Luke is the furthest of the three synoptic gospels from Jesus’s time, Luke portrays Jesus’ second coming as something that will not occur until far into the future. This contrasts with Mark’s and Matthew’s presentation that Jesus will return very soon.

The Gospel of John

John is very different from the synoptic gospels. In John, Jesus has a three-year ministry as opposed to only one year in the synoptics. The synoptics have many miracles, healings, and exorcisms, but there are only seven miracles, called "signs," in John’s gospel, and no exorcisms. In the synoptics, Jesus rarely talks about himself and always teaches publically in parables. In John, Jesus always speaks about himself in long philosophical discourses instead of parables. In John, Jesus is crucified on the day of preparation of Passover, when the Passover lambs were sacrificed (Thursday). For John, Jesus is the "Lamb of God". In the synoptics, Jesus is crucified on the Passover feast (Friday). This is why in John, there is no Last Supper with bread and wine. The Passover meal would have been on Thursday evening, when Passover began.

The gospel of John was written by a group who referred to themselves as “we”, however they periodically appeal to one of Jesus’ disciples as a source. The authors also used other textual sources. Essential to John, is a focus on the divinity of Jesus. The synoptic gospels present Jesus in very human terms, but John portrays Jesus as a divine being who temporarily came into the world to reveal the Father. John repeatedly uses God’s name revealed to Moses in the burning bush, “I AM” (Exodus 3:14) to refer to Jesus. In its final form, John’s gospel also engages and refutes an early heterodox form Christianity that emerged at the turn of the first century (ca. AD 100) called “Gnosticism.”
Historical Criticism and Christian Faith

This brief survey indicates merely a few ways in which each of the four gospels presents a distinctive and unique portrait of Jesus. Christians today often have difficulty reconciling modern biblical scholarship with faith in the Bible as the Word of God. Yet many Christians have fully embraced historical criticism while maintaining faith in divine inspiration of the Bible. There are numerous ways to do so, but one of the most common is based on the Incarnation.

The Incarnation is the Christian belief that God, the Word, became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is fully divine and fully human; in fact 100% God and 100% human. Christians affirm this as true but say we cannot comprehend this because it involves God’s nature, which human minds cannot comprehend. In His human nature, Jesus had all the limitations of finite human beings, except sin. He had every feature of a human being so that His divine nature did not eclipse any detail that made him fully human. In the same way, scripture is divine and human, and the human aspect of scripture does not compete with the divine. Jesus is the Word made flesh, God become man, and similarly, the scripture is God's Word "enfleshed" in fully human words, thought forms, genres of writing, etc. Christians have at times focused on Jesus’ divine nature to the exclusion of His full humanity. Similarly, Christians can focus on the divine nature of scripture to the exclusion of its full humanity. A truly Christian view, however, will be “Incarnational”—affirming with equal strength, the divine and the human natures, both of the person of Jesus, and of the Word of God in scripture.