



## **Reading Glasses: Source Criticism**

by Jim West, ThD

Bible scholars use a variety of tools or methods in order to understand the biblical text. When they read the Bible they ask themselves:

**What** does the text say?

**Why** does it say what it says?

**How** does it say what it says?

Sometimes, a close reading leads them to notice that the Bible frequently repeats itself or says the same thing in two or more different ways.

For example, when they read Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 they notice that both these chapters describe creation but they do it in such different ways that questions arise. Was humanity created last, as chapter 1 has it, or more towards the start of the process, as chapter 2 suggests? When they read the story of Noah later on in the book of Genesis they wonder why in one section Noah is told to take two of each kind of animal into the ark and in another section he's told to take 7 pair of clean and 1 pair of unclean.

The same sorts of questions arise when scholars read the New Testament; particularly the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament. The first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are called the Synoptic Gospels because they seem to see things 'with the same eye' (syn-optically) and are very close in their outline of events. These similarities have led most scholars to see them as related or interdependent to some extent. (For a fuller explanation, read Isaac Alderman's piece on the Synoptic Question in this issue.)

Scholars use *source criticism* to unravel the pressing questions of why some passages seem so similar to one another and yet also quite different.

### **What is Source Criticism and Why Does It Matter?**

When you prepare a report or a project, you draw on sources—perhaps an encyclopedia such as Britannica or Wikipedia, a textbook, a library book, or a newspaper article. Knowing the source of a document helps us to determine its intention and purpose. In our day, for instance, whether a document comes from Fox News or the New York Times has a great deal to do with how it will be understood. That, in sum, is why source criticism matters.

Source criticism is the tool scholars use to figure out what sources, or materials, biblical authors drew on. When scholars read Genesis 1 and 2 they apply *source criticism* to explain why there are two very similar stories side by side in the same book, but which contain striking differences. Many Old Testament (sometimes called Hebrew Bible) experts think that Genesis 1 was actually written later than Genesis 2 and that each chapter had a different author. They believe this because they see the sources used by those authors as responding to the interests of two important social groups at the time—the priests (Genesis 1) and the 'historians' (Genesis 2)

Source criticism is perhaps most famous for what scholars call the “documentary hypothesis.” This was the discovery that the first five books of the Old Testament (called the Pentateuch, from the Greek words meaning 'five' and 'scroll case') were comprised of four major sources known as the The Yahwist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist, and the Priestly. These sources were all eventually combined into the Pentateuch we know today over a very long process over an equally long period of time.

Other books in the Hebrew Bible are also seen as being comprised of sources. For instance, Jeremiah is believed to be made up of a prose source and a poetic source. Isaiah is seen to be made up of three major sources, Isaiah 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66 (called Isaiah, Second, or Deutero-Isaiah, and Third, or Trito Isaiah respectively).

Sources are found in the New Testament too. The Gospels are believed to be made up of an earlier, lost source called 'Q' (from the German word *Quelle* which means source), passages of Mark, special material Matthew alone used, and material unique to Luke. And the Gospel of John too is comprised of a 'signs source' and a 'sayings source,' neither of which is used by the other three gospels.

Naturally, there are variations among scholars on all of these sources and some deny altogether that sources exist, believing instead that each book, or even larger segments, were written by only one or two authors who made use of no sources whatsoever.

### **How Does Source Criticism Work?**

Source Criticism works the same way that a person assembling a puzzle works. Pieces are examined and fit together so that the 'big picture' becomes visible. Individual pieces may contain only bits of information that in and of themselves seem quite insignificant, but if they are missing when the puzzle is done the picture is incomplete.

It's easy to do a little exercise with a brief and well known passage which will show how source criticism works. The passage is the Lord's Prayer, which is found in two versions, one in Matthew 6:9-13, and the other in Luke 11:2-4. Read the passages and ask:

- 1- How are these passages similar?
- 2- How are these passages different?

- 3- Who is addressed?
- 4- What is the main idea?
- 5- Why do you think the prayer was remembered?

The answers to these questions will be different, for the most part, because Matthew and Luke have different purposes in their use of the prayer. For instance, Matthew's use is very 'liturgical' and appears to have been designed for a setting in worship while Luke's appears far more 'primitive' and seems meant to draw the 'pray-er' near to Jesus. Where the answers to the above questions overlap we can be fairly certain that we have traced the prayer to its source. Or in other words, what they share in common stems from their source and where they part company we see the hand of Matthew and Luke most clearly at work.

Source criticism is another valuable tool that helps scholars unravel and understand the fascinating collection of ancient texts we call the Bible.

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