

REDACTION CRITICISM AND THE EVANGELICAL DRIFTRev Brian Edwards, BD, Surbiton

1.

Redaction criticism is really as old as Higher Criticism and has reference to the various editors who compiled Scripture and arranged the material to suit their theme. For example, Bultmann believed the second-century church invented and altered stories in order to portray their concept of Christ. For an Old Testament critic it might be post-exilic priests tampering with old stories of the origins of primitive tribes to produce a glorious history of Israel. But men like Bultmann and Wellhausen were really just Form Critics; that is, they were chiefly concerned with the way the sources used to compile the Bible were moulded by the life and thought of the Church. Redaction Criticism begins by assuming the result of Form Criticism and building upon it. Professor Norman Perrin maintains in his introductory book *"What is Redaction Criticism?"* (1969) that the first serious redaction critic, R.H. Lightfoot and Wilhelm Wrede before him, finally robbed the Gospels of the need to be taken as serious history, (history is consistently used in this article with the meaning of relating events as they factually were). Wrede concluded that Mark, for example, can only be read as history by reading all kinds of things into the text: "The Gospel of Mark belongs to the history of Christian dogma." During his Bampton lectures in 1934, Lightfoot shocked the world of N.T. Scholarship by declaring: "For all the inestimable value of the Gospels, they yield us little more than a whisper of his (Jesus) voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his ways." After the Second World War, Bornkamm, Conzelmann and Marxsen pressed Redaction Criticism into the forefront of the critical disciplines. It was, in fact, Marxsen who, in 1956, coined the word *Redaktionsgeschichte*.

A glance at some of the conclusions of redaction

criticism may prove helpful at this point. Marxsen looked for the esoteric in Mark. Thus the narrative of John Baptist in the wilderness has nothing to do with desert places of sand and rock, but refers to the fact that the Baptist fulfils the wilderness of O.T. prophecy: "The Baptist would be the one who came 'in the desert' even if his whole life had never been anywhere near a desert." Conzelmann claimed that Luke could no longer be seen as the historian but as a "self-conscious theologian"; Luke was in no way motivated by a desire for historical accuracy, but entirely by his theological concept of the role of Jerusalem in the history of salvation. Perrin offers an example of redaction criticism at work from the narratives of Caesarea Philippi. On Mark 8:34-37 he concludes, "This section is made up of four sayings which very likely originally circulated separately in the tradition and then were gradually brought together because of their similarity of content and because of the common catchword 'life'." The last two expressions "must have originally been separate sayings because they make quite different points; v.36 that riches are of no avail at death and v.37 that life is the highest good (Bultmann)". In this narrative Peter is used as a picture of the church thinking of Christ as divine-man who therefore could not suffer; Christ had to dispel this erroneous view. In Matthew Peter is honoured and commissioned. This gives an idea of redaction criticism in the hands of liberal critics.

However, in the hands of a conservative critic, redaction criticism has an apparently more positive use. The Gospel writers are seen as redactors or editors who arranged their material to suit their particular purpose. It is not suggested that they either invented or fabricated their material, but they did not quote verbatim or give every exact detail of the history. We are not therefore to listen for the ipsissima vox of Jesus or to expect detailed accuracy in Gospel chronology or sequence. Nevertheless, for those who have a high view of

the inspiration of Scripture, the Holy Spirit influenced the redactors so that He makes "An impression on the Church which wholly corresponds to what Jesus said" or "An accurate and trustworthy impression of the Lord's teachings". The first quotation comes from Abraham Kuyper and the second from N.B. Stonehouse. So far we may all be in agreement that this view is not out of line with John Murray, Warfield, Berkhof and Hodge. In fact it is easy to illustrate that we all use redaction criticism to a degree in our understanding of Scripture. Matthew and Luke differ from each other in the precise order of the last two temptations of Christ; our usual answer is that since neither claims to present an exact order, each is free to close with the temptation best suited to his theme - Matthew presenting Him as King and Luke as man. If that is redaction criticism, and it is, then the Puritans were using it in the 17th Century and it has never been seen to contradict the full doctrine of inspiration. A little more radical is the fact that in the parable of the sower Matthew, Mark and Luke each use a different Greek word to refer to those who hear and understand. Matthew uses "understand" Mark has "accept" and Luke uses "hold fast"! We insist that these three words adequately express all that Christ's original Aramaic statement conveyed. This in no way touches verbal inerrancy for it is the Holy Spirit controlling the redactors to convey exactly what our Lord actually conveyed at the time. In this sense it is the ipsissima vox of Jesus.

Robin Nixon writing on the authority of the New Testament in "*New Testament Interpretation*" (Paternoster p.339) reminds us that "The problem of the inspiration of the evangelists as creative editors of their material is not substantially different from the problem of the writers of the Epistles as interpreters of the Christ event."

2. The attraction and danger of Redaction Criticism

According to Hendriksen in his commentary on Luke's Gospel (Banner 1978) "Today Redaction Criticism is riding high". At this point we must move with caution and try to understand where the danger areas lie. Perhaps this can best be done by two illustrations.

a) In April 1978 Bruce Chilton, a lecturer in Biblical Studies at Sheffield, wrote an article in *Themelios* in which he concerned himself with redaction criticism under the title: "An evangelical and critical approach to the sayings of Jesus". Following the basic philosophy of redaction criticism, Chilton distinguishes between historical objectivity and the purpose of the redactor: "Before we can assess the historicity of the Gospels, we must confer with the texts in order to determine the purpose for which they were written". That is the first concession. He continues later: "The Gospels, then, are historically grounded considerations of the significance of Jesus in the mind of faith". That is the second concession, which has a Bultmannian ring about it. Chilton then takes Mark 9:1 and subjects it, and the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke, to a minute dissection showing the many Aramaean and Jewish influences that determined the way each redactor interpreted the saying of Jesus. The exegetical conclusion is that Jesus is not referring to the disciples at all but to Moses and Elijah! The method reveals a brilliant scholarship quite beyond the reach of those of us who have to preach and teach a congregation through the week. We may find ourselves more than a little suspicious of a method of hermeneutics that, by its nature, is locked within the academic preserves of the university professor. It is reminiscent of the days when the preacher had to consult the latest views from Tübingen or Oxford

before he knew how to present next Sunday's text! The foundation of Dr Chilton's approach is revealed in his claim that: "None of the documents which make up the New Testament would pass as 'history' in the modern sense; Edward Gibbon and Leopold von Ranke were not about at the time to write it". We will have to return to this point shortly but it must be carefully noted for it is the bedrock for evangelicals who are so attracted to redaction criticism. A few years ago such statements would never have been allowed to go unchallenged in evangelical circles.

b) The second illustration is drawn from an article that appeared in the *Evangelical Quarterly* for April/June 1977. It was written by Prof David Hawkin (Newfoundland) and entitled: "The Symbolism and Structure of the Marcan Redaction". In this article Prof. Hawkin stressed the importance of what he calls the "esoteric symbolism" of Mark's Gospel. In other words, Mark used a special secret symbolism with which he knew the initiated would be familiar. Our task is to uncover this esotericism in order to properly understand the book. The argument is that modern man has lost the ability to grasp symbolism; this is "poignantly demonstrated by the inability of the average man to capture the ethos of poets like Milton and John Donne . . ." Prof. Hawkins quotes with approval the answers of Joachim Jeremias to the question why Mark omitted the account of the institution of the Lord's Supper: "(Mark) consciously omitted the account of the Lord's Supper because he did not want to reveal the sacred formula to the general public". Without putting too fine a point to our response we are left wondering whether Prof. Hawkin would agree that the Holy Spirit who carefully guarded the secret through Mark, slipped up with Matthew, Luke, John and Paul! We do not want to deny that the Scriptures contain a certain element of esoteric material but there is a very real danger when redaction criticism gets into the hands of an unwary evangelical. Professor

Hawkin reveals a total acceptance of the conclusions of Wilhelm Wrede (*Messianic Secret in the Gospels* 1901).

Perhaps the greatest attraction in Redaction Criticism from the evangelical point of view is that it avoids completely the problem of harmonizing the apparent contradictions of the Gospels. When Dr Chilton describes the Gospels as "historical patterns highlighted with theological colouration" he may be quite right if he means that the history of Scripture has a theological end always in view; but he is quite wrong if this description is a way of avoiding an admission that all factual statements of Scripture are factually without error. It becomes all too easy for Prof. Hawkin to conclude: "Whether the two feeding miracles (the four and five thousand) constitute a doublet is debated but the question is irrelevant to the redaction as such". It may be comfortable at last for evangelicals to really side-step the problems of apparent discrepancies and this is the attraction and great danger of redaction criticism.

In two excellent articles by Moises Silva in the *Westminster Theological Journal* (Fall 1977 and Spring 1978) Ned B. Stonehouse is seen as a fore-runner to the evangelical use of Redaction Criticism. Prof. Stonehouse succeeded Gresham Machen as Professor of N.T. at Westminster, a post which he held until his death in 1962. Dr Silva described what he calls a "considerable evolution in Stonehouse's thought". Stonehouse moved from the position that the Gospel writers do not report everything verbatim to the position that they are often quite unconcerned with accurate recording of chronological data and finally that they actually took liberties with Jesus' very words. Whether Stonehouse crossed a Rubicon or merely paddled off the evangelical shore we must decide.

3. A critique of Redaction Criticism

There are four points at which we should challenge

26.

the drift of redaction criticism.

a) A challenge to its hermeneutics

The hermeneutics of Prof. Hawkin is really quite retrograde and takes us back to the old spiritualising of an evangelicalism that many of us had hoped was a thing of the past. Here is an example of his redaction heremeneutics in search of the esoteric meaning: "The feeding narratives symbolize the offering of salvation 'to the Jews first, but also to the Greek' (Romans 1:16). The idea that the feeding of the five thousand represents Christ's communication to the Gentiles is not new: it dates from the time of Augustine. A careful examination of both stories adds considerable weight to the theory. The scene of the feeding of the five thousand is placed in the framework of the Galilean ministry - the feeding of the four thousand in the framework of travel (cf. Mark 7:24). Jesus gives the five thousand five loaves (corresponding to the five books of the Law) and to the four thousand seven (probably a number connected with Gentiles - cf. the seven deacons in Acts 6:3). In the former story twelve baskets of scraps are collected (12 tribes of Israel) and in the latter seven (again). Also significant, perhaps, are the words for 'basket'. In the scene of the five thousand kophinos is used (Mark 6:43), indicating the size of basket commonly used by Jews, and in that of the four thousand the word sphuris, a more ordinary and common basket". If this is so, Scripture is no longer a plain man's guide and we are flirting with gnosticism. The theory that we must be looking for the redactor's hidden meaning must be proved not assumed, and the above example does nothing to prove the case, it merely assumes it.

b) A Challenge to its methodology:

Redaction criticism builds upon form criticism. There can be no denying this fact. Lightfoot went to Germany to study form criticism for the very

purpose of being better equipped to work on redaction criticism. Therefore the evangelical redaction critic is working within a framework the principles of which have been laid down by a Scholarship that rejects the full inspiration of Scripture. The futile efforts of Alfred Cave who, a century ago, tried to arrive at evangelical conclusions from Wellhausen hypotheses should, at least, be a warning here. The method of turning an hypothesis into an assumption simply by repeating the hypothesis often enough must be strongly rejected by evangelicals. Consider Perrin's comments on the last two expressions of Mark 8:36-37. "They must have originally been separate sayings because they make quite different points . . ." Such an absurd conclusion would never be seriously tolerated in the analysis of any piece of literature other than the Bible. Of the six or seven redaction tests, much is made of the "dissimilarity" test; that is, that material may be ascribed to Jesus only if it can be seen to be distinctive of Him. The assumption is that if the Jewish or Christian or pagan communities are unlikely to have made such an utterance then it is possible that it is a genuine statement of Christ. Similarly we are boldly informed that the early church "saw no reason to distinguish between words originally spoken by the historical Jesus bar Joseph from Nazareth and words ascribed to him in the tradition of the Church" (Perrin p.73); another totally untested assumption that violates all the available evidence; but an answer to this must wait until the section on historiography. In his foreword to Perrin's book, Prof. Dan D.Via of the University of Virginia admits that before redaction criticism the Gospels were "uncomplicated documents" telling "a rather straightforward story", now "the synoptics are understood to be enormously intricate products containing subtle and ingenious literary patterns and highly developed theological interpretations." But this conclusion is arrived at only by building a theory upon an

hypothesis using the result as an assumption and then treating it as the assured results of modern scholarship. Evangelicals ought to be more wary of this sort of method for it is not new. Even John Robinson, in another context, warned his academic world against "the tyranny of unexamined assumptions". (*Redating the N.T.* p.345).

c) A challenge to its fundamental theology

Whilst this is not the place to work it out in detail we must restate the traditional evangelical view that the writers of Scripture saw their words as God-given and inerrant. B.B.Warfield's article as long ago as 1893 "*The Real Problem of Inspiration*" has really not been superseded and, (as someone recently commented) it has not yet been answered. The redaction critic with a high view of Scripture will argue that this is not the issue; but it is. It is observable that evangelical scholars today are not averse to dismissing the editorial value of some parts of Scripture. In his recent contribution to the perennial debate about the date of Exodus and Conquest, J.J. Bimson suggests that part of Exodus 1:11 "in its present form may be late" and he speaks of a "late period when Exodus 1 was either compiled or revised" (*Redating the Exodus and Conquest* - University of Sheffield 1978). Elsewhere he argues that although the stories in Numbers "have a basic historical core ... the historicity of the narratives in Numbers 20 following should perhaps be held with certain reservations ... The events of periods subsequent to the Israelites' migration may have influenced the present form of the narratives, but the evidence does not justify dogmatism". This is typical of Dr. Bimson's inductive approach and there is an ever increasing tendency among evangelicals to take this line. We must insist on God's Word written as being truth without error and must require a plain commitment on the part of

evangelicals employing redaction criticism that they still believe in Biblical inerrancy as that term is traditionally understood.

d) A challenge to its historiography

According to Bruce Chilton "None of the documents which make up the N.T. ... would pass as 'history' in the modern sense; Edward Gibbon and Leopold von Ranke were not about at the time to write it". That is really the foundational plank of redaction criticism; it stands or falls there. In the same way we find Moises Silva asserting: "the Gospel writers do not handle history the way we normally expect a modern writer to handle it ... the evangelists evince a theological intent which has had at least some effect on the shaping of the historical material". It is not the last part of this quotation that we would question, but the first.

These evangelical brethren are merely adopting those unexamined assumptions of the critics. Perrin, for example, assures us that though by 'historical' we mean factual: "the ancient world simply did not think in this way." Interestingly the only evidence Perrin offers in support of this claim is that the N.T. writers held a different world view in that they actually believed in demons, angels, miracles etc.! This approach that the Gospel writers did not set out to write history as we know it, is being so generally adopted by evangelicals that we must not let it pass without a challenge at a number of points.

First there is the fallacy of unbiased history Pliny and Josephus were both writing history at the time the evangelists were writing their Gospels. Now the issue is not whether Gibbon and von Ranke were more accurate than Pliny and Josephus; to make this the ultimate test would bring us to the conclusion that Einstein was more of a scientist than Newton. The real issue is whether Gibbon,

von Ranke, Pliny and Josephus were all historians claiming to portray things as they really are. Each of them was influenced, more or less, by his political philosophy or his purpose in writing but the point we wish to establish is that they all intended their facts to be taken seriously. Pliny attempted sound scientific history and he was the founder of the modern encyclopaedia; his *Natural History* was still influential into the 17th Century. Josephus set out to write a history of the Jews and expected it to be taken as factual history. Both have since been shown to be frequently in error, and both were motivated by their own philosophy - but both set out to present the facts. Gibbon also had a purpose in writing, he wanted to vindicate intellectual freedom and his critical treatment, at times to the point of ridicule, of revelation and the supernatural hardly mark him as an unbiased historian. Even von Ranke, the father of objective history, reveals his strong bias against radical movements. Similarly both are considered to be factually in error in places by modern historians. All historians have a bias, since all history is interpretive; but bias and factual reporting need not conflict. That there were many religious myths and stories in the first century no-one can deny; the N.T. writers were well aware of their existence and warned against them (see for example 1 Timothy 1:4; 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:4; Titus 1:14 and 2 Peter 1:16). No-one could seriously compare the N.T. with Greek or Roman mythology. It is written in a totally different genre. The point is this: the first century was well aware of historiography as we know it and as modern historians practice it.

Second there are the conclusions of Sir William Ramsey. When Ramsey set out to subject the Gospels, and in particular Luke and Acts to the critical examination of the archaeologist he began with the strong bias of the Tübingen philosophy that:

"the Acts of the Apostles was written during the second half of the second century by an author who wished to influence the minds of people in his own time by a highly wrought and imaginative description of the early church", (*The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*); he expected to find Luke hopelessly inaccurate at every point. Half a century later he could conclude: "You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment" (*ibid*). The very point that impressed Ramsay was that Luke was an historian equal to any in the modern day; it is not surprising that liberal critics overlook Ramsay because of the embarrassment of his conclusions, but evangelicals ought never to forget him.

Thirdly we should remember the lesson of pseudepigraphal writing. In addition to the various and spurious letters of Peter, Paul, James and so on, the early church within the first two or three centuries of its life had some forty different 'Gospels' or lives of Christ to consider. A cursory reading of just a sample of these reveals the widespread fabrication of the stories, the ridiculous and often blasphemous character of those stories and the obvious inaccuracies. These forgeries were quickly detected by the church and Tertullian even tells of a deacon in Asia Minor who was flogged when he admitted writing the *Acts of Paul*. The early church leaders recognised that "Gall ought not to be mixed with honey". They were not looking merely for religious stories else they could have had them in abundance, they were looking for historical accuracy and apostolic authenticity.

Fourthly there is the declared aim of the N.T. writers. We are warned today not to press Luke 1: 1-4 too closely; but it is quite clear that Theophilus was meant to! Luke set out to give the truth and whilst it is readily acknowledged, and

always has been by the main stream of evangelicalism, that "an orderly account" means "with meaningful order" rather than necessarily "with exact chronological sequence" it cannot be allowed that under this umbrella Luke felt free to ignore chronology altogether, still less to subject the details of the narrative to anything other than an honest and factual report. Paul (1 Corinthians 15), Peter (2 Peter 1:16-18) and John (1 John 1:1-3) all declare their interest in accuracy obviously in the face of some who were already distorting the truth. In fact our Lord Himself pledged the disciples the aid of the Holy Spirit to ensure that they recorded accurately all that He had said to them (John 14:26).

Conclusion

We have not been arguing against redaction criticism in all its aspects. Of course it is healthy to observe the differing emphases and particular interests of each Gospel writer and, as we have already noted, we all use an element of redaction criticism sooner or later in expository preaching. What we have tried to do, however, is to sound a note of caution and to test some of the assumptions of modern evangelical redaction criticism. It is all too easy to dodge problems with the broad statement that the first century held different views of historical reporting than those of today but no-one has yet shown this to be true and until they do we must maintain that the assumption is false. We must not allow inerrancy to take on a new meaning nor must we allow our brethren to make large concessions to Bultmannism unchallenged. In a recent review of the latest book by the Catholic theologian Hans Küng, E.L.Mascall accused Küng of "a docile and uncritical acceptance of the established positions in the realm of Biblical criticism, at the very time when those positions are at long last beginning to be seriously questioned" (*Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol 31 No 2); perhaps we are seeing

something of this uncritical acceptance in the conservative camp. Are some evangelicals just being unwary or are they deliberately trying to bridge a gulf to the other side at a time when that side is making some progress to ours? We must say plainly to evangelicals who are enthusiastically set on the redaction course: if you must go forward, please proceed with caution, it is a dangerous road.

REMARKS ON THE FUNDAMENTAL PERSPECTIVE OF
JAMES BARR'S THEOLOGY

Dr Paul Wells,
Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée, France

James Barr's published work spans a period of 30 years to this point. His article on the Pelagian controversy, published in 1949, was the first of a series of important articles and books on a wide range of subjects. As well as his major books, Barr has published material of a very specialised nature, dictionary articles and reflections of a more general nature on the nature of biblical authority and interpretation.

In this comment, we shall therefore limit ourselves to a description of one aspect of Barr's work, concerning the nature of the Scripture. (1)

Much of Barr's work reveals a continuing search for an adequate statement of the relations between the nature of the biblical materials and their interpretation, between the status we accord the Scriptures and how we interpret the text. It can be considered as an attempt to approach the Scriptures apart from dogmas concerning the status of the Bible which invariably foster methods of interpretation which impose preconceived meanings