

In this breezy overview of New Testament scholarship that I've been giving, from roughly the 18<sup>th</sup> century till today (!) I have talked about textual criticism (establishing what the authors of the New Testament originally wrote based on the surviving manuscripts), source criticism (determining what the written sources of the New Testament were - especially the Gospels, and most especially the Synoptic Gospels), Life of Jesus research (up to Albert Schweitzer's day), and finally form criticism (the interest in establishing the formal characteristics of the oral traditions of Jesus in circulation before the Gospels were written down).

In some respects, form criticism put the final nail in the coffin of historical Jesus research, a coffin fashioned by Wrede and Schweitzer. If the stories about Jesus, even in our earliest Gospels, are not accounts of what happened but narratives that were formulated by communities of Christians after his death (as the form critics assumed), well, there's not much source material left if we want to reconstruct the life of Jesus. And so a lot of scholars gave up trying. For a long time.

The form critics used the Gospels more or less to mine the stories that were in them to hypothesize how they were formed at the oral stage of transmission. The Gospels themselves were not interesting to them as literary products so much. They were interesting only because they strung together a lot of oral stories about Jesus. It was these older (oral) stories that was of primary interest - and not because they indicated what Jesus said and did but showed, instead, but because they showed what was happening in the early years of Christianity when stories about Jesus were being formulated, invented, shaped, and used by the Christian churches around the Mediterranean.

For these form critics, the Gospel writers themselves were relatively unimportant and uninteresting. They took stories available to them and put them into a roughshod narrative, more or less like "putting pearls on a string," as Dibelius likened it. The pearls - the stories themselves - were what mattered. In a pearl necklace, who cares about the string?

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