

TODD BREWER

Hermeneutics and Early Christian Gospels

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

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Narrative and Non-Narrative Readings of the Parables
of the Tenants and Lost Sheep

Mohr Siebeck

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for Kelly

Preface

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Jersey City, New Jersey
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Todd Brewer

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Chapter 1

For and Against Narrative: the “Mural” and “Data” Approaches to the Jesus Tradition

In the aftermath of Jesus' life, the traditions of teachings and actions ascribed to him enjoyed immediate and significant popularity for many circles of the early Christian movement. For these communities, the Jesus tradition proved to be incredibly versatile, utilized within various cultural contexts and for numerous purposes. As new situations arose within Christianity, the teachings and events of Jesus continued to have abounding significance as a source for continuing reflection. The life and teachings of Jesus endured wherever and whenever Christianity was and is to be found. But this proliferating Jesus tradition did not itself prescribe any particular hermeneutical approach to interpreting its subject matter, leading to an inevitable hermeneutical uncertainty within the early church. What Jesus said or did was interpreted in a variety of ways as the church sought to understand Jesus and his present-day significance.

For many, the plethora of Jesus traditions available was viewed as discrete sayings of abiding importance. What mattered most was that Jesus said a given teaching and Jesus' words were understood in their own right apart from a narrower embedding within a chronological story of his life. This is what I call a “data” approach to the Jesus tradition.¹ Within its popular and scientific usage, data is viewed as a type of truth that is autonomous or self-contained. The production of data is the goal or result of experimentation and once it is discovered it becomes an interpretive object in its own right: data is analyzed, scrutinized, or examined. A “data” approach to the gospels seeks to mine the Jesus tradition to generate the raw data of Jesus' teaching that then can be understood in its own light, without the contextualization of narrative. This is not necessarily a de-contextualized methodology, as data points may be correlated

¹ The characterization of this interpretive approach as a “data” approach is indebted to, though slightly distinct from, Jacobus Liebenberg's description of recent parables research, “The preceding discussion attempted to focus on the ever-increasing role that the teaching of Jesus and more specifically the parables and aphorisms, as ‘database’ with distinct ‘historical value’ which supersedes that of their narrative frameworks (and which only require their ‘correct, original’ *form* and *Sitz im Leben* in order to provide access to Jesus) played in the question of their historical Jesus as the century progressed”. Jacobus Liebenberg, *The Language of the Kingdom and Jesus: Parable, Aphorism, and Metaphor in the Sayings Material Common to the Synoptic Tradition and the Gospel of Thomas* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 46.

together to create a trend, just as two teachings can be understood in light of each other.

The other approach of early Christianity to interpreting the Jesus tradition understood the narrative unfolding of his life to be fundamental to proper understanding. Here, the teachings and events comprise a larger irreducible story of Jesus' life, within which the constitutive parts are to be understood. These narratives do not provide data to be mined and isolated from the whole; instead, the individual events depend upon their contextual setting within a narrative framework for their meaning. This is what I call a "mural" approach to the Jesus tradition. Murals, by virtue of their usually large painting surface, often visually depict several events together toward a central theme. The events of a mural often move chronologically to create a narrative structure.² Like narrative, teachings or actions of murals are rendered as scenes. To understand a mural one must follow the progressive movement of the painting, noting the repeated motifs that hold the work together. In distinction to the "data" approach, a "mural" hermeneutic sees the story of Jesus as the narrative framework within which Jesus' actions and teachings must be understood.

These two approaches, "data" and "mural", are represented within early Christianity by the Gospels of Thomas and Matthew/Mark/Luke/John, respectively.³ The former contains a series of 114 teachings of Jesus with little to no depictions of his life. Occasionally, a teaching is introduced through a small conversation between Jesus and another figure (disciples, Salome, etc.), but these are sparse with detail and occur infrequently in the text. Each saying is usually introduced by the repeated phrase "Jesus said/says" (ΠΕΧΕ ΙC in the Coptic text and λέγει Ἰησοῦς in the Greek fragments). The loose, and often disconnected, list of Jesus' teachings offer the "data" desired by the interpreter. In this way, the genre of Thomas as a sayings collection is reflective of his "data" interpretive approach. Conversely, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all interweave the events and teachings of Jesus within continuous stories, narrating his life as it proceeds in linear time within various settings. Each evangelist depicts a coherent "mural" of Jesus' life from beginning to end, with each scene building upon and recalling each other. By way of a com-

² For more on the narrative structure of murals, see, M.A. Lavin, *The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches, 431–1600* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³ This precise contrast between sayings and narrative interpretive approaches has very recently been expounded by Chris Keith in his 2016 article "The Narratives of the Gospels and the Historical Jesus: Current Debates, Prior Debates and the Goal of Historical Jesus Research". Keith posits two alternate "models" within historical Jesus research, the first "attempts to get 'behind' early Christian interpretations of Jesus", while the second model places the narratives of the gospels "at the conceptual center... of a past reality". Keith contends that the later, narrational, model is methodologically defensible. Chris Keith, "The Narratives of the Gospels and the Historical Jesus: Current Debates, Prior Debates and the Goal of Historical Jesus Research" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38, no.4 (2016), 2.

parison between the interpretation of Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the present study seeks to determine some of the inherent interpretive tendencies of the "data" and "mural" approaches. The present study is not primarily concerned with the various understandings of parables as such, but what these might suggest about their respective interpretive paradigms, either "data" or "mural".

1.1 Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom

As the Jesus tradition spread through the history of Christianity, the hermeneutical uncertainty of the tradition persisted into the patristic era. The issue here is not necessarily the means by which the Jesus tradition spread (whether oral or written), but the means by which they were interpreted.⁴ Despite the increasing acceptance of the narrative gospels, these "data" and "mural" approaches to the Jesus tradition continued to be operative and may be typified in the interpretations of the parable of the sower by Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom.⁵ In his *Stromata* 1.7, Clement offers a "data" oriented approach to the parable of the sower within his lengthy discourse on the relationship between faith and philosophy. Alluding to Matthew 5.45, the knowledge possessed by Greek culture, which includes philosophy, is said to have rained down from God, who indiscriminately distributes this wisdom equally to all. But if the gift of knowledge is given equally to all, then what accounts for the wide differences between cultures? For Clement, the answer to this question is found in the parable of the sower and the prior allusion to Matthew 5.45 has clearly influenced his rendering of the parable. The world receives from Christ, the sower, the divine gift of the word since the foundation of the world. Differences of knowledge exist because of the differences between the places upon which the seed fell. In addition, the sower does not only sow wheat,

⁴ The focus here is not necessarily on the means by which the Jesus tradition might have spread, whether through oral or written mediums, but the means by which they were interpreted. Just as a written medium can be utilized toward both "data" and "mural" approaches, it is likely that oral tradition may have demonstrated such an interpretive ambivalence.

⁵ The use of these figures in this argument is principally illustrative and anecdotal of the two approaches to the Jesus tradition. *It is not meant to offer a comprehensive account of the development of early Christianity exegetical practices and its various influences, or to suggest anything comprehensive about Clement or Chrysostom's exegetical practices.* Reference may have been easily made to other theologians of early Christianity, with the "data" approach reflecting the writings of Origen, Irenaeus, or even Paul in Acts 20.35 and the "mural" approach represented by the writing of Tertullian or Paul in 1 Corinthians 11.23–25. It may also be possible to map the "data" and "mural" methods upon Frances Young's contrast between rhetorical and philosophical schools in her book, Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

but a great many other variety of agricultural products that are “all useful for life [αἰ πᾶσαι βιωφελεῖς],”⁶ corresponding to the various branches of philosophy: Stoic, Platonic, Epicurean, or Aristotelian. In their own way, all of these, for Clement, “teach righteousness with godly knowledge [δικαιοσύνην μετὰ εὐσεβοῦς ἐπιστήμης ἐκδιδάσκοντα].”⁷ However unfamiliar this may seem to those acquainted with the synoptic gospels’ understanding of the parable, Clement’s own understanding is nevertheless an ingenious reading of the parable. The sower is equated with Jesus and the sowing of the word represents Christ’s gift of righteousness/wisdom to all. Utilizing the parable’s report of a single casting of seed, Clement envisions this to have occurred at a single time before the creation of the world. The parable’s successive description of the soils corresponds loosely with the passage of time and, for Clement, their various geographic locations entail the gift of the divine logos to the world. Clement produces a reading of the parable is plainly a “data” approach. The parable lacks almost all of the distinguishing narrative details and instead firmly resides within the theological context offered by Clement. While Jesus is identified as the sower, there is no indication to whom, or where, or why the parable was spoken. The parable is coordinated with the saying from Matthew 5.45, but this also lacks narrative characteristics. So while it is possible that Clement had the Matthean text in view, it is especially notable that no mention is made of where the teaching originates.⁸ What matters to Clement is simply that Jesus taught the parable and he interprets it without reference to any narrative features.

Chrysostom’s discussion of the parable of the sower follows a broader discussion on Matthew 12.46–49,⁹ connecting its themes to the surrounding narrative contexts at several points. He notes the scene provided in Matthew’s mural; Jesus sat in a boat by the sea, facing the people not without purpose but in order to be heard by all. Jesus speaks here in parables and Chrysostom contrasts this indirect form of speech with his more direct address on the mount. He deduces that the audience of the parable is comprised of both the “simple people [δῆμος ἁπλοστος]” and the more learned Scribes and Pharisees. Finally, Chrysostom observes that the order of the collection of parables is not random, but begins with the most vivid parable “which makes the hearer more atten-

⁶ Clement, *Clementis Alexandrini opera quae Exstant Omnia*, ed. J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae Graecae* (Paris: 1857), Stromata 1.7.6.

⁷ Clement, *Clementis Alexandrini opera quae Exstant Omnia*, Stromata 1.7.6.

⁸ Clement’s citation of non-canonical material raises the question of the gospel texts he reads, but here it seems as though the version of the parable of the sower he uses also includes an interpretation of it, remarking that the parable was interpreted by the Lord (ἦν ὁ κύριος ἡρμήνευσεν). This indicates Clement’s usage of Matthew, and it also further underscores his “data” interpretation of a narrative text, since his interpretation so widely diverges from that of Matthew.

⁹ Found in homily 44 of John Chrysostom, *Homiliae In Matthaëum*, ed. J.P. Migne, vol. LVII, *Patrologia Graeca* (Paris: 1839).

tive [τὴν ποιούσαν τὸν ἀκροατὴν προσεκτικώτερον]”. Having set the stage, he then continues with his interpretation of the parable. For Chrysostom, the sower is Jesus and his coming to the field represents Christ’s “clothing himself with flesh [τῆς κατὰ σάρκα περιβολῆς]”. Jesus sows the word of godliness, his doctrine, to the souls of men. The indiscriminate nature of the sower’s casting then depicts Christ’s indifference to the worldly distinctions of men, whether rich/poor, wise/unwise, slothful/diligent, or brave/cowardly. The failure of the seed to take root follows that of Matthew’s interpretation, those who carelessly receive the word, the rich, and the superficial. Nevertheless, Chrysostom highlights that this reckless dispensing of the word is characteristic of God’s love to all people. If they do not receive the word with repentance, then the fault lies with them, “not because of their nature, but because of their decision [οὐ παρὰ τὴν φύσιν, ἀλλὰ παρὰ τὴν γνώμην]”. The parable, for Chrysostom, thus spurs the hearer toward moderation away from the vices and excesses of the world. In this way, Chrysostom has little time for either the seed that falls on the path or the rocky soil and has reduced the admonition of the parable to the threat of thorns and the cares of the world. Yet this application of the parable to Chrysostom’s hearers is nevertheless a reading of the parable and not straightforwardly imposed upon the text. Instead, the temporal distance between Jesus’ first telling of the parable and his present day is maintained and acknowledged. Chrysostom turns to speak in the first person plural “we” only after the statement, “therefore hearing these things [Ταῦτ’ οὖν ἀκούοντες]”, which marks the end of his exegetical analysis and the beginning of the text’s present-day implications. Chrysostom maintains the integrity of the mural of the narrative without painting himself into it.

This comparison between Clement of Alexandria and Chrysostom illustrates briefly the methodological strategies employed by both the “data” and “mural” approaches to interpreting Jesus’ parable of the sower and, by extension, Jesus’ teachings in general. In the “data” approach, the teaching of Jesus is treated as a discrete entity whose meaning is self-contained. It may be coordinated with other teachings, but this connection is supplied by the interpreter as best fitting the teaching. By comparison, the “mural” approach understands the teaching to be embedded within a wider setting providing contextual details such as the addressees of Jesus’ teaching, its geographical location, its place within a wider discourse, its effect, and its placement within the wider ministry of Jesus. They are not extraneous to understanding the teaching, but integral to this endeavor. Those things which the “mural” approach sees as essential are the very aspects of the Jesus tradition the “data” approach eschews. These two stances toward the Jesus tradition are therefore not compatible or complementary, but are opposed to each other in their evaluation of the necessary components of the Jesus tradition and its relation to the teaching. They may arrive at similar understandings of particular teachings, but they do so either by coincidence

or through the residual force of the narrative of the gospels upon the “data” approach.

It is not necessarily the question of whether Chrysostom’s interpretation of the parable, by virtue of its narrative interpretation, is more “correct” than Clement’s, or whether Clement’s interpretation is preferred. Both Clement and Chrysostom have offered compelling readings of Jesus’ parable of the sower and have sought to understand its significance. The question is instead what difference it makes whether one seeks to interpret the parable of the sower *qua* parable or the parable within the wider nexus of a narrative. How might one’s hermeneutical approach direct or influence one’s reading? Or more precisely, what relationship is there between the method one employs, “data” or “mural”, and the resultant interpretation? It is not simply that Clement and Chrysostom approach the parable with divergent theological or contextual presuppositions, though that is certainly the case. But perhaps their chosen means of reading the parable have, themselves, certain inherent *tendencies*.

1.2 Rudolf Bultmann, the *Analyst* of the Jesus Tradition

The divide between “data” and “mural” approaches to the Jesus tradition is by no means *only* an ancient issue and it can be traced throughout much of Christian history right up to the present day. Within the twentieth century, the “data” approach to the Jesus tradition and the gospels finds its perfection with the advent of form criticism and the writings of Rudolf Bultmann, while the “mural” approach is championed in the work of Hans Frei. Though they have many predecessors upon whose shoulders they stand,¹⁰ these two figures are important for this study because both have profoundly affected modern interpretation of the Jesus tradition and therefore will be the focus of future chapters.

For Bultmann, the isolation of Jesus’ teachings from the husk of the narrative reaches a methodological precision perhaps unprecedented in Christian history. Elevating the “data” approach to a science, Bultmann’s *History of the*

¹⁰ Bultmann notes in the *History of the Synoptic Tradition* his indebtedness to Julius Wellhausen’s *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, Hermann Gunkel, and Martin Dibelius’s *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* in particular, while Hans Frei depends upon the later work of Barth, specifically *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, and Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, specifically the section “Toward a Definition of Christ”. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thomson and H. Knight, vol. IV/1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010); Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1919); H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952); Julius Wellhausen, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien* (Berlin: Druck und Verlag von Georg Reimer, 1905). For Frei’s influences prior to *Identity of Jesus* see, Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence, and History: Hans W. Frei’s Public Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 65–67.

Synoptic Tradition cuts away with surgical precision almost all the narrative flourishes of the synoptic gospels, thereby arriving at the earliest stratum of the Jesus tradition. If earlier interpreters like Clement expressed indifference to the narrative framework, for Bultmann the narratives of the gospels represented the gradual accrual of traditions and teachings which manifestly did not originate with Jesus and were fabricated by the church. The task of interpretation must then bravely venture to separate the wheat of Jesus' authentic teachings from the chaff of inauthentic accretions. Despite this difference of motivations between Bultmann and Clement, the association of Bultmann with a "data" approach to the Jesus tradition remains apt and is one of which Bultmann himself was aware. In his popular level summary of form critical methodology he understands form criticism to be a continuation of the goals of pre-modern harmonization projects under a new historical awareness of gospel traditions.¹¹ As such, Bultmann dissects the Jesus tradition as a continuation of the "data" approach exemplified by Clement. In this approach, Bultmann bequeathed to the modern scholarly world a radicalized "data" approach to the Jesus tradition in the service of rediscovering the original historical Jesus before his adulteration in the hands of the community.

The selection of Bultmann as an interpreter of the Jesus tradition may appear odd to some since he is often caricatured as believing he cannot say anything about the historical Jesus. This categorization of Bultmann chiefly arises for two related reasons. The first regularly seizes upon Bultmann's declaration, "Indeed, I am of the opinion that we can know nothing more of the life and personality of Jesus"¹² and misconstrues it as an absolute summary of Bultmann's historical skepticism without recognizing its contextual and circumscribed meaning.¹³ But in the phrase, "life and personality of Jesus", Bultmann, following Schweitzer, refers exclusively to Jesus' "personality and the development of his inner life", topics which "the early Christian sources show

¹¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1966), 7; Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Kundsinn, *Form Criticism*, trans. Frederick C. Grant (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962 (1934)), 11.

¹² "Denn freilich bin ich der Meinung, daß wir vom Leben und von der Persönlichkeit Jesu so gut wie nichts mehr wissen können". Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus, Die Unsterblichen. Die geistigen Heroen der Menschheit in ihrem Leben und Wirken* (Berlin: Deutsche Bibliothek Berlin, 1926), 12. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 8.

¹³ Along these lines, Neill and Wright mischaracterize Bultmann's position, summarizing it as a "negative attitude" that "of Jesus of Nazareth, as he actually was in history, we know hardly anything at all". See also Dawes, who writes in his survey of historical Jesus studies, "On historical grounds alone, Bultmann is skeptical about our ability to know the Jesus of history". Dawes then proceeds to cite the aforementioned quote from Bultmann. Gregory W. Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Question: The Challenge of History to Religious Authority* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 273; Stephen Neill and N.T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament: 1861–1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 265.

no interest in".¹⁴ Whether or not Bultmann is correct in this judgment, it is far from the sweeping historical skepticism attributed to him. The second reason follows from the first. Once he is popularly understood according to his supposed historical skepticism, Bultmann then falls neatly into the now commonplace three-fold division of historical Jesus studies into various "quests" (first, second/new, and third quests of the historical Jesus).¹⁵ Between the first and second quests, Bultmann is slotted into the "no quest" historical period after Albert Schweitzer and before Ernst Käsemann.¹⁶ This, however, depends primarily upon the above caricature and confuses the second/new quest's critique of Bultmann's theological position concerning the relation between Christian faith and history with his historical reconstruction.¹⁷ Yet Bultmann cannot be said to occupy a position of "no quest" within a history of Jesus studies chiefly because he published his own book on Jesus in 1926.¹⁸ If Bultmann genuinely did think that there is nothing one can say about Jesus, then writing a book about him is an odd way to show it. Instead, the thorough historical-critical sifting of the Jesus tradition in Bultmann's form criticism principally operates in service of his own portrait of Jesus. The skepticism of *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921) prepares the way for his later *Jesus* (1926) book and it is the congruous relationship between these two works which confirms the association of Bultmann with a "data" approach.

¹⁴ "Da die christlichen Quellen sich dafür nicht interessiert haben". Bultmann, *Jesus*, 12. Cf. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, 8.

¹⁵ This tripartite division of historical Jesus studies originates from Neill and Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament: 1861–1986*, 379–403.

¹⁶ See, for example, the textbook on the historical Jesus by Theissen and Merz, which places Bultmann within this "no quest" period. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 5–7.

¹⁷ The issue of the new quest is not that Bultmann refrained from speaking of the historical Jesus, but that his significance for Christian faith was exclusively correlated to his death, rather than the content of his proclamation. Against this position, his student Käsemann vigorously argued that the Jesus' teachings positively contributed to the content of the kerygma so that the evangelical message of the early church repeats and is informed by Jesus the evangelist. Käsemann states, "We can now put our problem in a nutshell: does the New Testament kerygma count the historical Jesus among the criteria of its own validity? We have to answer this question roundly in the affirmative". Yet it is not that Käsemann offers a historical reconstruction of Jesus' life that is significantly different from that of Bultmann; the difference instead lies in the assessment of their value *vis-à-vis* Christian faith, a valuation Käsemann interestingly finds justification for in the narrative form of the canonical gospels. Ernst Käsemann, "Blind Alleys in the 'Jesus of History' Controversy," in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 48.

¹⁸ This is especially true since the book was met with wide commercial success, with several print runs totaling in the tens of thousands by the time Käsemann reinitiated the supposed quest in 1953. Cf. Walter Schmithals, "Jesus verkündigt das Evangelium: Bultmanns Jesus-Buch," in *Jesus im 21. Jahrhundert: Bultmanns Jesusbuch und die heutige Jesusforschung*, ed. Ulrich H.J. Körtner (Neukirchen-Vluy: Neukirchener, 2006).

1.2.1 History of the Synoptic Tradition: Digging for the Gospel of Thomas

In distinction from Martin Dibelius, the form criticism of Rudolf Bultmann aims to identify the various additions and modifications of the Jesus tradition by the community in order to identify the earliest stratum of authentic tradition that *may* have originated from Jesus himself. This sifting out of inauthentic, later additions to judge the genuineness of a saying or event Bultmann believes is “an essential part [eine wesentliche Rolle]”¹⁹ of his inquiry. To accomplish this task, Bultmann sets out to identify the manner in which the specific forms of the gospel tradition (logia, miracle stories, parables, etc.) were shaped within the life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the early church. This requires, on the one hand, a definite picture of the life of the community prior to the composition of the gospel texts, and, on the other hand, an understanding of how the particular forms evolved within this life setting. This procedure is undoubtedly circular, given the absence of information about the communities of the gospels prior to their composition. The starting point for determining the development of particular forms thus begins with the modifications made to the tradition between Mark and his successors, Matthew and Luke, as well as between Matthew/Luke and the hypothetical Q document. Having established several principles of transmission, Bultmann retrojects these processes backwards in time to the earliest possible layer of tradition that likely originates from Jesus himself. The resultant picture of the history of the synoptic tradition envisions its movement from Jesus to the Jewish, Palestinian Church, to Hellenistic Christianity.²⁰ This procedure is certainly remarkable in its rigor, consistently carried out by Bultmann to the entirety of the Jesus tradition.

However impressive this methodological machinery may be, at nearly every point in the Jesus tradition the end result is largely the same: beneath all the narrative flourishes of the gospels lies an identifiable, primitive stratum of Jesus’ teachings, intelligible in isolation from that later adulteration. The sorting and study of the Jesus tradition into the variety of forms – the very starting point of form criticism – presumes that the teaching may be isolated from its narrative embedding. The consistent and thoroughgoing nature of this endeavor is particularly evident with Bultmann’s treatment of the form he categorizes as an apophthegm. In contrast to the dominical sayings that, “are not placed within a particular framework”, apophthegms are briefly defined as “sayings of Jesus set in a brief context”.²¹ These are scenes within the narrative where a teaching of Jesus is occasioned, conditioned, or generated by an external impetus, such

¹⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 2 ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931), 6; Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 5.

²⁰ A history of the early church Bultmann derives originally from: Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013).

²¹ Bultmann, *Geschichte* 8–9; Bultmann, *History* 11.

as a question from an interlocutor or a healing. Within the narrative, the scene and the teaching it contains mutually interpret one another. For Bultmann, the cohesion between teaching and scene varies: some appear to be unitary compositions while others are only artificially connected. It is at this point that the distaste for narrative features is revealed. The observation that two conjoined pieces of tradition do not easily cohere is fairly straightforward, but there is nothing in this observation to suggest that one element is more primitive than the other. This, however, is precisely what Bultmann infers:

Instances such as Mk. 2.15–17, 7.1–23, 10.2–12, where the artificiality of the composition is clear as day; or Mk. 2.1–12; Lk. 7.41–43, where the insertion into an alien narrative is clear; or Mt. 12.11f. and Lk. 14.5, where sayings that are placed differently in the tradition, all these show that in many cases the arguments were already there before the narratives themselves.²²

Bultmann deduces here a tendency (*Tendenz*) within apothegms whereby “the sayings have commonly generated the situation, not vice-versa”.²³ Though the original apophthegm form contained minimal description of the scene,²⁴ the narrativization of the original dominical sayings continues for Bultmann along a common trajectory to add greater embellishments that fill out the narrative picture: “As soon as the apophthegm is affected by an interest in history or developed story telling we meet with more precise statements”.²⁵ Originally anonymous locations and persons are then identified and given proper names. Thus, the apophthegm form evolves toward the narratives of the synoptic gospels through the steady “intrusion of novel-like tendencies”.²⁶ So an entire form which depends upon narrative features for its intelligibility is systematically stripped of secondary adornments and only the original dominical saying remains.

The historical process of the tradition from sayings to narrative which Bultmann describes in the apophthegm form becomes paradigmatic for the entirety of the *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Having reduced the apophthegms to dominical sayings, the dominical sayings (whether they be logia, prophetic and apocalyptic sayings, legal sayings, “I” sayings, or similitudes) can likewise be

²² “Fälle wie Mt. 2,15–17; 7,1–23; 10,2–12; wo die Künstlichkeit der Komposition am Tage liegt, wie Mk. 2,1–12; Lk. 7,41–43, wo die Einschaltung in eine fremde Geschichte deutlich ist, wie Mt. 12,11f. und Lk 14,5, Sprüche, die in der Tradition verschieden untergebracht sind, – zeigen, daß in vielen Fällen die Argument vor den Geschichten da waren”. Bultmann, *Geschichte* 48–49. Bultmann, *History* 47.

²³ “Die Worten eine Situation erzeugt, nicht umgekehrt”. Bultmann, *Geschichte* 49. Cf. Bultmann, *History* 47. It does not seem to occur to Bultmann that the scenes that comprise these disjointed apophthegms might themselves be primitive as well as the teaching within them. Perhaps a good punch-line was needed for a traditional scene?

²⁴ Bultmann, *Geschichte* 67–68; Bultmann, *History* 63–64.

²⁵ “Sobald das geschichtliche Interesse oder entwickelteres Erzähler interesse sich an die Apophthegmata heranmacht, werden bestimmtere Angaben gemacht”. Bultmann, *Geschichte* 71; Bultmann, *History* 67.

²⁶ “Eindringen novellistischer Tendenzen”. Bultmann, *Geschichte* 72.

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