

Controversy Stories

The term “controversy story” (or: controversy dialogue, conflict story, conflict paradigm, or apophthegm, pronouncement story) is applied to a brief narrative, usually within the Synoptic Gospels. In a controversy story Jesus is challenged directly, less frequently indirectly, by opponents and answers them in a *gnome*, less frequently with a sign accompanied by a *gnome*, without convincing them of his position. The identification of controversy stories goes back to the form-critical study of M. Albertz, who was the first to identify a historical development of a particular literary form from its different concrete appearances. This historicization was a significant step for form criticism away from the assumption of a timeless form. Even though Albertz’s project of grounding the controversy stories in historical conflicts between Jesus and his opponents did not succeed, form critics such as Bultmann, Dibelius, and Taylor took up the idea that controversy stories exhibit a development that allows a glimpse of early Christian missionary preaching (Dibelius), or community exhortation (Bultmann), perhaps in continuity with the historical Jesus (Taylor). They assumed that the more a controversy story is developed in its narrative elements the younger it is. However, later studies (Hultgren; Repschinski) have shown that this assumption cannot be maintained.

As early form critics could not agree on a common *Sitz im Leben* of the controversy stories, they did not agree on the required formal elements either. Albertz described an exposition and dialogue rather loosely. Dibelius emphasized brevity with a didactic style, culminating in a saying of Jesus. Bultmann defined more strictly three formal elements of an occasion that gives rise to an objection that leads to a short and pithy answer by Jesus. Taylor emphasized the pithy answer by calling it a pronouncement. This feature drew Bultmann to observe structural parallels between controversy stories and the Hellenistic literary form of apothegms known from the progymnasmata, and modern studies have confirmed this (Repschinski; Berger 1984: 1093), even though the pithy answer can be expanded into an extended scolding (e.g., Mark 7: 1–15). Attempts at distinguishing between *apophthegms* and *chreiai* (Berger 2005: 142) have not been significant for the study of controversy stories.

Structural elements in controversy stories are: (a) a highly variable narrative introduction; (b) the objection to actions or teachings of Jesus or his disciples; (c) the riposte of Jesus, typically as a pithy saying, occasionally amplified by a miracle; (d) a highly variable and often absent narrative conclusion. Objection and riposte can also be expanded into dialogue or interspersed with narrative.

Since controversy stories are a subgroup of *chreiai*, their description of conflict is not based on structural but on narrative elements. These may occur in any of the structural elements. In the narrative introduction this may be the attempt to accuse or tempt Jesus, or anger directed at him. The objection can contain accusations of blasphemy or collusion with Beelzebul or lawlessness. In Matthew, even the address “teacher” already denotes hostility. In the riposte, the opponents are exposed as confused, as being or thinking evil, as not knowing scripture, or as hypocrites or a brood of vipers who do not keep the commandments and are hard of heart. The narrative conclusion can contain similar signs of hostility.

Since controversy stories are distinguished from *chreiai* only by their content, the term can be abandoned on strictly formal grounds and the stories subsumed under other subgroups of *chreiai* (Berger 2005: 142–43). However, if distinctive features of controversy stories are found on the narrative rather than on the formal level, their function must also be assessed in terms of narrative. First, it can be observed that none of the controversy stories leads to a positive resolution of conflict on the level of the story. Thus it must be inferred that the stories function primarily apologetically, to assure and convince the reader of Jesus’ superiority over his opponents. Secondly, the stories contain no character development. The opponents of Jesus are invariably hostile, and Matthew in particular edits narratives to avoid a positive characterization of established hostile characters (Matt 22: 41–46). The controversy stories play a decisive role in maintaining the suspense of the larger plot, as is evident from their accumulation at the beginning and the end of the gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ public ministry.

The accumulated force of the controversy stories within the larger narratives, with static characters putting forth their opposing views, suggests a tentative association with the *agones* of the literature of antiquity (Berger 1984: 1305–10; Repschinski: 284–93), particularly if the reader is viewed as the referee. Furthermore, within the Gospels the controversy stories serve as preparation for, and explanation of, Jesus’ death and resurrection.

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