

The Limits of Reliability

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IN *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Richard Bauckham argues

that the Gospel texts are much closer to the form in which the eyewitnesses told their stories or passed on their traditions than is commonly envisaged in current scholarship. This is what gives the Gospels their character as testimony. They embody the testimony of the eyewitnesses, not of course without editing and interpretation, but in a way that is substantially faithful to how the eyewitnesses themselves told it, since the Evangelists were in more or less direct contact with eyewitnesses, not removed from them by a long process of anonymous transmission of the traditions.¹

As in *God Crucified*, where Bauckham wishes to bridge the gap between functional and ontological Christology with his category of identity,² so here he wishes to bridge the gap between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith with his category of eyewitness testimony. Thus, Bauckham proposes to answer a theological question (the Jesus of History–Christ of

¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 6.

² Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism & Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), viii. Bauckham correctly criticizes the dichotomy between functional Christology (in which Jesus has divine functions but is not himself divine) and ontological Christology (in which Jesus is by nature divine). He proposes that Jesus shares the identity of the God of Israel, which means that non-monotheist analogies are rejected and Jesus shares in the historical actions of the Lord God. Bauckham's conception of second-Temple Jewish monotheism is oddly Muslim, and his category of identity sounds perilously Modalist.

Faith dichotomy) with a historical answer (eyewitness testimony).³ This problem arises, according to Bauckham, “when historians suspect that these texts may be hiding the real Jesus from us.”⁴ Thus, the root problem that eyewitness testimony is meant to solve is that of the historical unreliability of the Gospels. While Bauckham provides an acute critique of form criticism in its traditional form, he has an awkward emphasis on historical reliability. I propose to discuss what is meant by the historical reliability of the Gospels and to praise their unreliability.

An Acute Critique of “Form Criticism”

Bauckham does succeed in attacking the historical use of “form criticism” à la Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Dibelius, and Vincent Taylor, and in constructing a Protestant form of apostolic succession. The earliest proponents of form criticism held that a long period of unregulated oral tradition separated the editors of the Gospels from the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ career. They further claimed to be able to identify the life-situation and relative date of individual instances of oral tradition. Few today would allow these latter claims,⁵ and Bauckham does not bother to argue extensively against them. He does, however, argue that the period of oral tradition was not unregulated. Bauckham proposes that Christian communities recognized the authority of eyewitnesses and their successors as bearers/regulators of the oral tradition. This eyewitness authority bears a remarkable resemblance to what a Catholic would call apostolic succession. The dissimilarity lies in the limitation of the authority to providing memories of Jesus to the human authors of the Gospels. This model as far as it goes is highly plausible. It is more likely that eyewitnesses and their successors formed some kind of magisterium in the life of the Church than that they disappeared and the tradition was free-form.

An Awkward Emphasis on “Historical Reliability”

Bauckham’s argument falters on his hypothesis of the “*inclusio* of eyewitness testimony.” Papias, Luke, and John emphasize the category of eyewitness testimony; Matthew and Mark make no such claims for themselves. No such literary device exists. The deeper problem lies in Bauckham’s

³ Personally, I have never understood this dichotomy as problematic. My historical studies aid and enrich my Christian faith. Since I believe in the unity of truth, I have no difficulty recognizing that if history and theology are at loggerheads, one is most likely doing bad history and bad theology.

⁴ Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 2.

⁵ For example, s.v., “Form Criticism (NT),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

awkward emphasis on historical reliability. What is meant when we say that the Gospels are historically reliable? And why is it a problem when they are historically unreliable?

The New Testament accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are historically reliable. After all, if we did not recognize some kind of historical reliability in our sources of information, we would need to abandon all attempts to answer historical questions.⁶ Indeed, it is of the nature of any historical investigation to have sources that differ. The judicious weighing of evidence is essential to the historical enterprise, and multiple judgments concerning sources are inevitable. The goal of any historical research is to provide as plausible, economical, comprehensive, and fertile readings as possible of a set of incomplete and complex data. Uncertainty is built into the process, and attempts to hone methodology in order to avoid uncertainty are hopeless and give rise to the sort of naïve positivism that is so common and so dangerous for faith.

Further, if we look at the Gospels we see that the range of authorial creativity is not particularly great. For example, Jesus is not portrayed as bringing rain as Elijah did. If the authors of the Gospels or their traditions were simply using biblical stories to generate incidents in the life of Jesus, why was he not portrayed as a rain-maker?⁷ And Jesus heals Gentiles and raises the dead only twice. If the authors creatively made up stories that were useful for the community, Jesus would have healed Gentiles and raised the dead frequently in their narratives! It is the later, non-canonical gospels that have wholesale creation of incidents ranging from anachronistic secret teachings to killing and resurrecting childhood playmates. A simple glance at a synopsis of the Gospels will show that the general range of creativity is not particularly great. We could not organize the vast majority of the text into parallel columns if the authors were as creative and unreliable as is sometimes asserted. Thus, there is no reason to suppose that the tradition embedded in the four Gospels as a whole is historically unreliable.

The Gospels are *grosso modo* historically reliable. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to investigate the kind and degree of the Gospels' historical

⁶ This point needs to be made with respect to the work of the Jesus Seminar. If the sources are as tainted with unhistorical data as they contend, no amount of manipulation can salvage bits and pieces of historical information. The methodological problem is insoluble, so that their work is a form of science fiction—that is, novelistic treatment of an idea making use of imaginary science.

⁷ For example, Geza Vermes identifies Jesus as a Northern Jewish charismatic similar to noted rain-makers Elijah, Honi the Circle-drawer, and Hanina ben Dosa. Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

reliability. E. P. Sanders, in the conclusion to his revolutionary *Jesus and Judaism*, writes:

This study has been based on the view that knowledge about Jesus can be stratified, according to its degree of certainty, along the following scale: beyond reasonable doubt ("certain"), highly probable, probable, possible, conceivable, unprovable, incredible. The things best known about Jesus are certain facts about him, his career and its aftermath. . . .

These facts yield *certain* knowledge about Jesus of a general *character*.⁸

This view of degrees of certainty and doubt is far more nuanced and useful than simply asserting or denying the historical reliability of the Gospels. In particular, it is useful to recognize that the general character of the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels is certain. The sorts of actions and sayings that are generally attributed to him are beyond a reasonable doubt. For example, Jesus cast out unclean spirits. There is no historical reason to doubt this activity because it is so well attested.⁹ The narrative details of this or that exorcism are naturally far less certain, because we have multiple accounts that differ precisely in their narrative details. In general, the Gospels are in substantial agreement as to the historical facts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; God dwells in the details.

God dwells in the historically unreliable details because the diversity of portraits of Jesus in the texts safeguards us from historical reductionism. For example, on what day of the month was Jesus crucified? In John's Gospel, Jesus is crucified at the hour of the Passover sacrifice: Jesus died on the fourteenth day of Nisan. In the Synoptic Gospels, the Last Supper is the Passover meal: Jesus died on the fifteenth day of Nisan. Since denying the historical irreconcilability of these details would be dishonest, the truth of these dates must lie elsewhere. Both accounts shed light on the ways in which Jesus is our Passover (1 Corinthians). He is the ultimate Passover sacrifice of end-time divine worship (John, Hebrews, Ephesians), and he is the ultimate Passover meal partaken by Christians in the Eucharist (Matthew, Mark, 1 Corinthians). Thus, the historical unreliability of the narratives embodies a richer, deeper theological unity by means of the divergent portraits of Jesus in the Gospels.

Another example of historical unreliability is even more extreme: the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke. The two accounts are simply

⁸ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 321.

⁹ Of course, if one is a nineteenth-century rationalist, miracles are impossible and these things did not happen. Rejecting the miraculous a priori in analyzing first-century Mediterranean cultures can only lead to substantial misunderstanding of those cultures. This is a philosophical rather than a historical problem.

irreconcilable. And yet, they agree on certain important points: the virgin birth of Jesus, the date of his birth in the last years of the reign of Herod the Great, the place of his birth in Bethlehem. The theological and narrative differences of these two accounts underscore their agreement on these historical points. And yet Luke's sophisticated Septuagintal pastiche and Matthew's multilayered midrash embed Jesus' personal story in the story of the Israel of God. Although the infancy narratives are historically unreliable (apart from their points of agreement), they provide Spirit-inspired portraits of who Jesus is. Thus, God dwells in the details. Where the Gospels are historically reliable, God teaches us through events and narratives. Where the Gospels are historically irreconcilable, God teaches us deeper and more important truths. The Spirit inspired four Gospels to be written and subsequently to be recognized by the Church as canonical. This fourfold diversity is not a problem to be solved but a spiritual resource enriching the prayer, proclamation, and praxis of the Church.

Conclusion

The point of the Gospels is not simply to provide the reader with historical information about Jesus (nor to provide a textbook for doctrine and/or ethics). The Scriptures are a privileged means of communion with the Trinity. By hearing and doing the Word, the Church grows in grace. Wisdom is the interior, contemplative dimension of this communion where love and knowledge are united. Holiness is the exterior, active dimension of this communion where human actions manifest their divine origin. Although the Scriptures are useful for instruction, they are not reducible to any one component—history, doctrine, ethics, philosophy, poetry, literature. The attempt to straitjacket the Gospel to the notions of historical truth inherited from the French Enlightenment does not advance the Gospel.¹⁰ In other words, the Scriptures are not univocal, but have a plurality of meanings limited only by the analogy of faith.¹¹ The Gospel is not in chains, but rather comes alive in the Church's prayer, proclamation, praise, growth in virtue, acts of mercy, and the celebration

¹⁰ Critical historical study is a primary tool for the contemporary engagement of the sacred page, rather than a monopolistic one.

¹¹ The analogy of faith recognizes that the reading community (the Church) has the freedom to use the Scriptures in any way that helps growth in wisdom and holiness. Readings that lead to communal damage or even self-destruction are excluded. The reading community's experience over time (Tradition) provides the norms for adjudication to those empowered to adjudicate (the Magisterium). The process is guided by the author of the Scriptures himself—God.

of the sacraments. For Christians to grow in wisdom and holiness, the Scriptures must be open to multiple meanings. Otherwise we would have merely historical information about an ancient book rather than the Word of God. N V