QUESTION:

I’ve seen, somewhere on the internet (I know, great source!) some discussion that modern scholarship is moving away from the idea of criteria (such as multiple attestation, dissimilarity, etc.) and that the use of criteria is becoming seen as outmoded. Is there any truth to this, or were these sources just blowing

RESPONSE:

This question is about the criteria that scholars use to establish historically reliable material about the historical Jesus. For background: there are several criteria that get used; the two most common are independent attestation and dissimilarity. To make sense of them, one needs to realize what was happening to the traditions of Jesus as they were being circulated, mainly by word of mouth, in the Roman empire. It’s a long story. The short version of it is this: stories were being changed by the story-tellers and some stories were being made up. There’s simply no way around this, from a historical perspective. Just about the only ones who disagree are people who have theological reasons for thinking that every single story about Jesus in the NT is absolutely historically accurate in all its details – that is, conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists who have a theological rather than a historical approach to the Bible. For virtually everyone else, of course the NT contains stories that have been altered or invented about Jesus.

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So how do you know which ones are made up? That’s where the criteria come in. The criterion of independent attestation says that if you have a tradition about something Jesus said and did that is attested in multiple, *independent* sources (so that one of them did not get it from others), then it is more likely to be authentic (since no one author made it up). I think this is a good criterion: obviously if you have five people who independently have the same story and they haven’t gotten it from one another, it has a better chance of being authentic than if you have just one source that says so.

The second criterion says that if there are stories about what Jesus said or did that do not fit what the Christians would have wanted to say about him, those stories are more likely authentic than ones that could easily be imagined as something a Christian would have wanted to make up about him. This too is a good criterion, although it has limitations. But on the upside, if the stories are being changed (or invented) in light of the Christians’ self-interests in telling them, then anything that works against those self-interests found in the tradition are not stories the Christians have invented.

One can use these criteria to show that Jesus was born a Jew, that he had brothers, that he was baptized by John the Baptist, that he preached an apocalyptic message, that he had twelve disciples, that he was betrayed, that he was crucified, and lots of other things. I give the details in my book Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium.

Still, it is true that the criteria are under attack in some historical circles, because even if they are the best available, they are problematic.

Independent attestation, for example. Lots of things may be independently attested because they were firmly rooted in the tradition about Jesus early on in the process of telling stories.
about him, so that writers twenty or more years later could well have independently heard stories that were made up (say ten years before they were writing).

And dissimilarity assumes that we know what every single storyteller among the Christians had as his or her agenda, and that there was not a wide variety of followers of Jesus with a wide variety of agendas. What might seem “counter” to what Christians would have wanted to say about Jesus (e.g., that he was baptized by someone else for the remission of sins) you can imagine some Christians very much wanting to say (he was baptized showing that we should be too).

So yes, the criteria are problematic and coming under attack. The question is whether anything can be put in their place. (It is much easier to tear down than to build up!) And whether the flaws they have are on the margins or at the core. My sense is that they are on the margins, and that as history is not an objective quantifiable science, but based on value judgments rooted in probabilities (this is more probable than that), they are usable and useful for establishing what happened in the past – not just for Jesus, but for anyone who lived in the remote past.

More on the Criterion of Independent Attestation
Faith, History, and Isaiah 7