Over the past couple of class periods I have been introducing my undergraduate students to the problems that confront critical scholars who try to reconstruct what Jesus really said and did. These problems are created by the nature of our materials – especially the New Testament Gospels – which is why I begin my course — which focuses on the historical approach to the New Testament — in something other than the chronological order of events or writings. Irony!

But an irony with pretty compelling logic. If we began with a chronological order of writings, of course, we would begin the course with the writings of Paul, since these are the first surviving writings from any early Christian – earlier by 15-30 years than the Gospels. But it doesn’t make sense to start with Paul (in my opinion) if you don’t know something about Jesus. And you can’t begin with Jesus unless you know something about our sources for Jesus, our Gospels. And so for a historical approach to the New Testament, we go out of chronological order. Go figure.

We spend the first number of weeks in the course studying the Gospels to see what the distinctive features of each one are, to see what their overarching emphases are, to see how they are each presenting Jesus. While doing that, we find numerous problems with the Gospels: they are written decades after the events they describe by authors who were not eyewitnesses, who were living in different countries and speaking a different language from Jesus, who were basing their accounts on oral traditions they had heard (or written sources that were themselves based on oral traditions). And even without serious scholarship we know what happens to stories circulating by word of mouth!

As a result, the Gospels are filled with historical problems, discrepancies, legendary accretions, and so on. That does not undermine, at all, their literary value. But if we move from considering them as literary texts that tell amazing stories of Jesus to historical sources that can help us know what Jesus said and did, how do we proceed?

What I argue in the class is that we need to proceed by applying rigorous historical criteria to each and every tradition in the Gospels to see if it can claim to be historically accurate. Among the various criteria that I introduce my students to, none is as controversial (among my students and among hard-core scholars both!) as one known as the Criterion of Dissimilarity. Its logic and sense are rooted in the nature of our sources. Here is how I describe it in my textbook on the New Testament.

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