

Once students have come to see what the contents, characteristics, and emphases of each of the Gospels are, and have recognized that the Gospels cannot be taken as historically reliable accounts of what “really” happened in the life of Jesus, both because of their many discrepancies and because of historical implausibilities (as just two examples: Luke’s “census” that gets Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem; or the Triumphal Entry, where Jesus is publicly acclaimed messiah by the massive crowds and the authorities do nothing about it) – once students have recognized this, they are in a position to consider the criteria that scholars use to ferret out from sources such as these bona fide historical information.

I stress with my students that the literary questions one brings to the Gospels are different from historical questions. The literary questions are the ones we ask about the Gospels as works of literature: what they want to teach and what message they want to convey. The historical questions are ones we ask about the Gospels as sources: what they can tell us about historical events in the life of Jesus, that is, how they can inform us about what he really said and did (as opposed to what each of the Gospels claim he said and did). It is one thing to say that in the Gospel of John Jesus said “I and the Father are one.” It is a completely different thing to say that Jesus himself – the actual man, living in the 20s in Galilee – said these words. John certainly indicates that he did say them. But Jesus himself almost certainly did not say them. And how do we know? We have to approach the Gospels not only as literary documents that present what their authors want to say about Jesus (for John: he is equal with God), but also as historical documents that can instruct us about what happened in the life of Jesus.

When the class moves into the question of the historical Jesus, we naturally look at all the references to Jesus in other sources, outside the Gospels: Paul, the rest of the New Testament, Josephus, Roman authors, and non-canonical Gospels. These are enough to show that Jesus almost certainly did exist, but as a whole they do not give us much to go on if we want to know what he said and did. Our earliest and best sources for that – as highly problematic as they are! (I never downplay the problems. Quite the opposite, as my students will eagerly, or ruefully, tell you) – are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

But these are indeed problematic. They are written decades after Jesus’ life (30, 40, 60 years later), by people who were not eyewitnesses and probably never met any eyewitnesses, writing in different countries, using a different language, and basing their accounts on stories that had been in circulation, by word of mouth, in all those intervening years and that had, as a result, been changed time and again, and sometimes made up. It’s a problem.

But scholars have devised criteria for dealing with sources of this kind to extract from them historically reliable information. I can devote fuller posts to each of these, if anyone wants. For now, basically, in a nutshell, scholars look for traditions about what Jesus said or did that (a) are attested in multiple independent sources (if numerous sources independently say the same thing about Jesus, no one of these sources made it up, and the tradition must be earlier than them all); (b) do not support the biases of the early Christian story tellers and authors (so that traditions of this kind were not “made up” by Christians, but were passed along because they were things known to have happened); and (c) cohere with what we know about first-century Palestinian Judaism (otherwise they can’t possibly apply to someone who was a first-century Palestinian Jew).

Scholars who apply these criteria to our Gospels are able to deduce a large number of facts about the life of Jesus. Some of them may seem trivial to some of my students: Jesus was

born and raised a Jew, in Jewish culture, to Jewish parents; he followed and came to teach the Jewish Law; he had brothers, one of whom was named James; he had twelve disciples; and, well, lots of other things. Some of the facts are not so trivial: he was baptized by John the Baptist, spent a preaching ministry in Galilee, went the last week of his life to Jerusalem, where he raised the ire of the authorities and was crucified by the Romans. Some of the facts are absolutely key to understanding what Jesus was all about: he was an apocalyptic prophet who believed that the world was controlled by forces of evil, but that God was soon to intervene to destroy everything and everyone opposed to him, and to establish a utopian kingdom here on earth - possibly with Jesus as the King.

I will discuss in greater detail this apocalyptic view of Jesus in my next post.



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