

Criteria for authenticity in historical Jesus research: Some methodological considerations

ABSTRACT

Different stages of the study of the historical Jesus have developed and refined different criteria by which traditions are sifted to reveal historical nuggets, of which the latest is the criterion of historical plausibility. These criteria are being evaluated in this article. It is argued that no criteria can offer historical certainty, but they do provide help to arrive at a degree of probability. The proper use of the criterion of historical plausibility may lead to a better understanding of the Jesus traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Historical Jesus research continues to captivate the interest of scholars. Recently there has been renewed discussion of the criteria of authenticity. Rightly or wrongly, scholars over the years have used historical criticism to make specific historical judgements about the content of the Gospels. Methods utilized by this approach have resulted in many hot debates. Not only methods were at stake, but also presuppositions about historical reliability of the Biblical text. Yet almost all historical Jesus studies nowadays make use of these methods. Thus anyone who engages in historical Jesus research needs to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and be able to assess how well or poorly these methods are applied in scholarly research.

Different stages of the study of the historical Jesus have developed and refined different criteria by which traditions are sifted to reveal historical nuggets. The question as to how New Testament traditions are sifted for historical material necessitates an evaluation of the criteria used for this purpose.

In historical Jesus research it is assumed that most texts contain material of varying authenticity. Techniques have been devised to test and identify provenance. The Enlightenment resulted in the rise of sceptical criticism. Such study tried to separate the historical Jesus from the confessed Christ of the Bible, who was regarded as the early church's theologically biased presentation of Jesus. In this post-Enlightenment quest for the historical Jesus dissimilarity became a form of the criterion: "that which contradicted the later church's exalted view of Jesus was considered especially authentic" (Theissen & Winter 2002: 1). The basic orientation of this phase can be described as "antidogmatic" (Bock 2002:141) as "the Jesus of history was a different person from the Christ of the Church's faith" (Bock 2002:150). By contrast, the "New Quest" or "Second Quest" was far less radical than the first quest had been. This new approach follows the plea of Käsemann not to continue with Bultmann's agnosticism about Jesus (Porter 2000:32). More recently an effort has emerged to focus on the Jewish background of Jesus' life and ministry

by the “Third Quest”. Yet much of the same criteria as that of the former quest was used to distinguish Jesus from Judaism (Theissen & Winter 2002:3). The “New Quest” sought to discover the authentic Jesus by distinguishing him from both early Christianity and his Jewish background.

Meier however view these quests as “theological projects masquerading as historical projects” (Meier 1999:463). Meier rather offers five primary criteria, with five less useful secondary criteria (Meier 1991:167ff). Crossan notes that historical Jesus researchers have not yet reached consensus on the criteria (Crossan 1998:144). Theissen and Winter observes that only two are strictly criteria of authenticity, the others being source evaluation arguments (Theissen & Winter 2002:18). In the light of these ongoing discussions, the aim of this article is to evaluate the frequently used criteria as proposed by Meier.

THE CRITERION OF EMBARRASSMENT

Meier is of the opinion that certain sayings would not have been created by Christian tradition because they undermined the Christian case (Meier 1991:168). Embarrassing material such as Jesus’ baptism by (his inferior) John would probably be softened or suppressed, so is more likely to be historically authentic.

However, what appears embarrassing to us nowadays might not have been so to early Christians. Paul was clearly not embarrassed by his experience on the Damascus Road. Both in his own writings and in Luke’s accounts, his experience of humiliation and exaltation is central. Allegedly embarrassing material survived in the Gospel traditions, so was evidently not embarrassing enough to be expurgated (Allison 1998:6). Jesus’ last words on the cross are a groan in the earliest tradition (Mark 15:34,37). This was replaced by references to the Psalms in Luke and Matthew (Ps. 31:5 see Lk. 23:46; Ps. 22:1 see Mt. 27:46). In John 19:30 we find a cry of triumph. However, Passion narratives use Psalms to reflect on the narrative of the cross, so the use of Psalm 22 may be theological interpretation rather than the replacement of an embarrassing image. Jesus might have quoted Psalm 22 on the cross, although the criterion of embarrassment alone cannot establish it (Meier 1991:171). The evangelist also might have presented explicitly what was implicit in the original setting. That distinction as such does not mean that the evangelist distorted the historical event.

The criterion of embarrassment solely can not be regarded as unailing. It must therefore be used alongside other criteria.

THE CRITERION OF DISCONTINUITY OR DISSIMILARITY

Searching for “words or deeds of Jesus that can not be derived from Judaism at the time of Jesus or from the early Church after him” (Meier 1991:171) became programmatic for the “New Quest” following Käsemann (Bock 2002:147; Porter 2000: 70; Theissen & Winter 2002:3). This criterion was believed to offer an irreducible minimum of authentic material: not only were sayings which satisfied the criterion deemed authentic, but they were the only ones which could be known to be authentic (Dunn 2003:82; Walker 2002:405). However, difficulties exist with such an assumption.

Firstly, this approach presupposes clear knowledge of the background from which Jesus may be distinguished (Meier 1991:172). Proving that Jesus’ teachings were without analogy in Judaism, or even that “particular ideas and motifs were in principle inconceivable in Judaism” (Theissen & Winter 2002:185), is impossible. Second-Temple Judaism contained significant diversity.

Secondly, Jesus’ distinctiveness according to this criterion is dogmatic rather than historical. It should be regarded as an *a priori* assumption (Theissen & Winter 1998:115) rather than a

criterion in search of the historical Jesus. Jesus may be to some degree unique from his forebears, but the more revolutionary He was, the more likely He would be to have imitators, and it is not possible to argue for him being unique from his followers (Meier 1991:174).

The most serious objection with this criterion is that it produces “a strange creature, with anything which links him to the religion of his people or the teaching of his followers ruled out of court” (Dunn 2003:82). Meier argues that if He were completely discontinuous, He would be unintelligible (Meier 1991:172). Wright reverses this criterion, arguing that if something “is credible within Judaism (though deeply subversive) and credible as the implied starting point (though not the exact replica) of something in later Christianity, there is a strong possibility of our being in touch with the genuine history of Jesus” (Wright 1996:132). Dissimilarity must rather be a matter of degree. The Jesus Seminar suggests that “Jesus’ sayings and parables cut against the social and religious grain” (Funk & Hoover 1993:31). It is reasonable to visualise Jesus as a radical interpreter of Jewish tradition, but even radicals conform at some point. Something characteristic or unusual (Meier 1991:174) is more likely than uniqueness.

Considering the criterion of discontinuity of dissimilarity it is fair to suggest that Jesus must have stood out from his context, but to make that the key to authenticity goes too far.

THE CRITERION OF MULTIPLE INDEPENDENT ATTESTATION

According to this criterion the more attestations of tradition in independent literary sources and literary genres, the more likely the tradition is to be authentic (Meier 1991:174; Walker 2004:401). However it should be kept in mind that sources must be independent. This is obvious for example when comparing Mark with Luke. The same saying in Mark and Luke normally illustrates Luke’s dependence on Mark, unless the Lukan version is different from the Markan original in ways not accountable by Lukan redaction.

The Jesus Seminar rules of attestation (Funk & Hoover 1993:26) seek criteria to identify tradition traceable to the oral period, roughly two decades between the life of Jesus and the writing of the earliest Gospel traditions (Funk & Hoover 1993:25; Porter 2000:82). Crossan uses multiple independent attestation to develop an inventory of the Jesus tradition (Crossan 1991:427ff), showing that the earlier the stratum and the more independent attestations, the more likely is the tradition to be authentic.

There are difficulties in both method and assumptions of this criterion. Crossan’s inventory identifies first-stratum multiply-attested material which must be more authentic. Apocalyptic traditions about Jesus’ return fall into this category (Crossan 1991:427), but he rejects them on the grounds that Jesus supposedly did not use apocalyptic (Crossan 1991:238ff). Either the strength of the tradition counters the grounds on which Crossan rejects apocalyptic, or his rejection of apocalyptic calls into question the value of multiple independent attestations.

Further, Crossan’s inventory can only trace material back into the early period of tradition, and does not guarantee original Jesus tradition. Multiple independent attestation can indicate very early tradition, but is unable to distinguish between a very early Christian prophet and Jesus himself (Allison 1998:21f).

The criterion assumes that multiple attestation guarantees a higher degree of authenticity. However, a text may be singly attested simply due to the loss of supporting manuscripts (Wright 1996:51). Authentic tradition may have lost its place for many other reasons. Each gospel includes traditions not known to others. Traditions may have posed theological problems to some (see Q. 9:59-60), or be no longer understood (see Q. 16:16), or be irrelevant beyond dialogue with Pharisees (see Q. 11:39-52) (Allison 1998:26). In this regard the view of Allison makes sense: “The relative reliability of Q when it is backed up by other witnesses should encourage us to trust

it when it is not so backed up” (Allison 1998:27).

Furthermore, multiply attested texts may have survived not because they were authentic, but because they were popular (Eve 2005:29). Singly-attested texts may be authentic, even if consistent with the theological concerns of the writer (the criterion of the tendency of the tradition – see below). The text may have been selected because it was consistent with the author’s needs and purposes. The state of the surviving manuscripts means there is insufficient evidence to evaluate this case (Kloppenborg 1990:116). Some Pauline tradition supports Gospel tradition (eg 1 Cor. 15:3f), but other allusions may be less obvious. “Paul’s letters must be interpreted as theological reflection on the first-order kerygmatic narrative about Jesus” (Hays 2004:221) - allusions are more difficult to compare than Gospel parallels, but may be significant. For example, there may be attestation which is missed simply because the evidence is no longer clear. There is also the possibility that evidence of attestation is missing by choice. The fact that Paul says very little about the empty tomb may suggest that it is a tradition which he does not know (that is, tradition originating with Mark), or it may suggest that it is a firm historical tradition which he knows but chooses not to use because it is not directly appropriate to the rhetorical needs of the argument at that point (Viljoen 2005:417ff.).

THE CRITERION OF COHERENCE

The criterion of coherence considers coherency with existing material (Walker 2002:407). According to this criterion it becomes possible to identify material coherent with the existing database once enough authentic Jesus-tradition is collected (Meier 1991:176). But this does not guarantee authenticity, because it would be coherent with the tradition and not necessarily with Jesus. It assumes a coherence in Jesus’ own teachings which wasn’t necessarily there. The Semitic mind enjoyed paradox, so while Jesus is defined as either eschatological prophet (Allison) or wisdom teacher (Crossan), Jesus may have been both according to audience and situation. It is possible that material may be rejected as not coherent, when it was simply coherent with a different part of Jesus’ teaching.

There must have been collections of known Jesus tradition against which Christian prophecy could be tested (Dunn 2003:191). Anything distinctive must have come from Jesus himself, as anything not coherent with existing teaching would have been rejected as false. The Jesus Seminar argues that sayings which contrast with the gospel tradition must be older tradition, but that does not guarantee authentic tradition (Funk & Hoover 1993:24). Existing tradition usually has a conservative force, militating against innovation or addition. Major problems in the early churches did not lead to the creation of relevant sayings. There are for example no alleged sayings of Jesus concerning the circumcision of Gentiles (Meier 1991:187f).

Coherence is open to the same difficulties as dissimilarity. Coherence assumes a sufficiently established database of knowledge of the tradition, and assumes that to be a consistent tradition. Any variety in Jesus’ teaching or gaps in knowledge of that teaching weaken the value of the criterion.

THE CRITERION OF JESUS’ REJECTION AND EXECUTION

This criterion seeks to explain why Jesus was executed as “King of the Jews” (Meier 1991:177). There is wide consensus among scholars that the death of Jesus is not a mythological construct developed from Christian theology. Indeed many assume that his death in itself is the historical event which was the source of that theology. Certain portrayals of Jesus (Cynic philosopher, wisdom teacher, and healer) however do not explain violent opposition. For this reason Meier

remarks that “a Jesus whose words and deeds would not alienate people, especially powerful people, is not the historical Jesus” (Meier 1991:177).

This criterion demands too high a degree of consistency, namely that Jesus was *only* a wisdom based teacher or miracle-working healer. If however He varied styles of ministry, the criterion breaks down. If He were a charismatic prophet who did occasionally use politically innocuous wisdom, He could have been crucified on the basis of the former, but traces of tradition which would not explain his death would nevertheless be authentic.

THE CRITERION OF TRACES OF ARAMAIC

According to this criterion the assumption of an Aramaic original leads to the search for a more original version (Vermees 1973:128), via Semitisms in the existing text (Jeremias 1966:173f). Similarly, if there are no traces of Aramaic, the saying is regarded as not from Jesus (Meier 1991: 178; Porter 2000: 89).

This test has two problems. Firstly, traces of Aramaic may reach back into very early tradition, but not conclusively to Jesus. A particular saying could just as well indicate an Aramaic-speaking Christian prophet (Allison 1998:7). The following remarks of Dunn and Meier should be considered. “The criterion ... cannot distinguish between an Aramaic-speaking Jesus and an Aramaic-speaking church” (Dunn 2003:83). “What if early disciples ... imitated the rhetorical style of the Master they had listened to for a number of years?” (Meier 1999:474).

Secondly, the outcome of such an investigation depends upon the quality of translation of the texts. Skilful translation of a text may remove all traces of Aramaic in a rendition into fluent, idiomatic Greek. By comparison, a poorer translation may be more “wooden” (Meier 1991:179), like the “slavishly literal” Greek Old Testament of Aquila (Bruce 1963:152). Some Greek is deliberately Semitic, perhaps imitating the LXX (Marshall 1979:55). Similarly, authentic Aramaisms could be remembered as typical of Jesus: *talitha koum* (Mk. 5:41) or *abba*, attributed to Jesus only in Mk. 14:36, but found in Greek-speaking Christian tradition (Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:6-7) with *marana tha* (1 Cor. 16:22), testifying to its importance. Aramaisms may not necessarily indicate original Jesus-tradition, but later compositions remembered from elsewhere (Funk & Hoover 1993:62). However, it is arguable that Aramaic tradition was remembered as typical of Jesus (Dunn 2003:738).

It may be concluded that Aramaisms may indicate a later imitation, while a text with none may just as well be a well-translated original. Aramaic alone is no guide to provenance, although it could support material verified by other criteria.

THE CRITERION OF JESUS’ PALESTINIAN ENVIRONMENT

This criterion is built on the assumption that material reflecting Jesus’ Palestinian environment is thought more likely to be authentic. This hypothesis however is dubious, since the cultural background of the thirties would not differ significantly from the late twenties (Meier 1991:180).

Like the criterion of Aramaisms, this criterion of environment equally cannot distinguish between material of Jesus and of his immediate followers.

THE CRITERION OF VIVIDNESS OF NARRATION

It is assumed that liveliness or concrete details may suggest eyewitness account (Meier 1991:181f). This criterion yet is not infallible. It can only reveal the skill of the narrator, and not necessarily his identity. “Vivid details are part and parcel of an omniscient narrator’s perspective

in good story-telling” (Lincoln 2002:5). Dunn argues that the tradition should be examined from the standpoint of frequent performances of oral tradition, rather than redaction of written texts (Dunn 2003:223f).

Vivid narrative does not indicate authenticity.

THE CRITERION OF THE TENDENCY OF THE DEVELOPING GOSPEL TRADITION

The Jesus Seminar argues that words of Jesus in “Christian language” were created later. “The inclination of the evangelists ... was to make Jesus himself affirm what they themselves believed had come to pass” (Funk & Hoover 1993: 24). Statements like Mk.8:31; 9:31; 10:33 allegedly reflect Paul’s gospel (1 Cor.15:3-5), and are therefore created by later tradition. This assumption is being used as the criterion of the tendency of the developing gospel tradition (Walker 2002:404).

Meier considers this criterion “highly questionable” (Meier 1991:182). He is sceptical of the belief that critics can ‘reverse-engineer’ authentic Jesus-tradition. Only where redactional trends are discernible, sayings “massively suffused” with the language and thought of the evangelist can be excluded (Meier 1991:182).

Against the assumption that words of Jesus in “Christian language” were created later, it can be argued that particular words entered Christian tradition because they were remembered as words which Jesus used. Thus Markan sayings might look more like creations of the tradition because they betray knowledge of things which happened after Jesus’ death (Funk & Hoover 1993:25). But Jesus could have anticipated his death, and may have expressed hope in resurrection. A next question arises as how far the sayings were created anew, and how far they were adapted from original sayings.

Adaptation may have taken place during the mnemonic gathering of sayings into clusters according to key words (Funk & Hoover 1993:19), and the creation of narrative contexts for aphorisms. Narrative contexts or *chreia* are pronouncement stories created to fit sayings. Yet Wright argues the contrary: the natural way for Jesus’ stories to be told was through Jewish controversy stories. The original context would be the immediate retelling of the event. It would be repeatedly retold during Jesus’ lifetime, and later in post-Easter tradition. Wright argues that stories could have been “smoothed down over time into something more like Hellenistic *chreiai*” (Wright 1992:432). The structure of sayings in the Gospel of Thomas could have so developed, rather than Thomas containing more primitive forms than the Synoptic equivalents (Wright 1992:432). The addition of a narrative context may appear more plausible than its removal, but that depends on the purpose of the genre: the theological purpose of sayings-gospels suggests a theological agenda for the removal of narrative framework.

It is acceptable to assume that development exists, but it is stretching the argument to make it a general principle. The use of the criterion of the tendency of the developing gospel tradition is limited.

THE CRITERION OF HISTORICAL PRESUMPTION

The issue with this criterion is whether the burden of proof lies in denying or affirming historicity (Meier 1991:183). A long traditioning process suggests that the burden lies in affirming historicity. Suggested eyewitness origins of tradition however suggest that the burden lies in denying historicity. In fact, the burden lies in attempting to prove anything. For these reasons this criterion is one of the least valuable, especially in the “convoluted case of the canonical Gospels (where) such a criterion simply does not exist” (Meier 1991:183).

Most scholars concede that the holy grail of historical objectivity will never be found. Sanders sets out a spectrum between ‘certain’ and ‘incredible’ (Sanders 1985:321) and seeks the most

probable solution. Crossan argues for honesty rather than “unattainable objectivity” (Crossan 1991: xxxiv). Meier examines a comprehensive list of criteria, showing that there is no “magic key unlocking all doors” (Meier 1991:184). At best, they will “produce judgements that are only more or less probable; certainty is not to be had” (Meier 1991:167). Theissen and Winter (2002:173) rather suggest a criterion of historical plausibility.

THE CRITERION OF PLAUSIBILITY

This criterion is meant as a correction of the criterion of dissimilarity. It is assumed that evidence for Jesus will not be found by separating him from his context. “The historian is interested in determining the material relation of Jesus to his context and to the history of his effects, in which there will be both points in common and points of disagreement, both lines of continuity and gaps of discontinuity” (Theissen & Winter 2002:173). The aim is to discover a Jesus who could plausibly have existed within his historical context (First Century Judaism), and plausibly given rise to known historical effects (the early Christian movement). Puig I Tàrrach describes the criterion of plausibility through four sub-criteria as axes: impact and context (developing the criterion of discontinuity) and coherence and incoherence (developing the criterion of discontinuity) (Puig I Tàrrach 2000:189). Theissen and Winter rewrites Meier’s criteria as subcriteria of the criterion of the plausibility of historical effects. ‘Opposition to traditional bias’ (Theissen & Winter 2002:174f) is like the tendency of the developing tradition. ‘Coherence of sources’ (Theissen & Winter 2002:179f) is like multiple independent attestation. ‘Contextual appropriateness’ examines correspondence to the Jewish context rather than difference from it, standing “the traditional criterion of dissimilarity on its head” (Theissen & Winter 2002:180). ‘Contextual distinctiveness’ refines dissimilarity, allowing for “distinctive individual traits of Jesus within the Judaism of his own time” (Theissen & Winter 2002:185). The method is tested by contextual plausibility and plausibility of historical effects. Both are necessary. It can be argued that plausibility of effects demonstrates no more than a myth which caused certain developments to take place, and must be balanced by contextual plausibility. “The more convincingly we can uncover the connections of Jesus to his Jewish context, the more certain we will be that we are penetrating behind the post-Easter Christian pictures of Jesus in order to find the historical reality prior to Easter, and that Jesus is not a product of the history of early Christianity, but of Judaism” (Theissen & Winter 2002:241). Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that it is only helpful so far, only taking us back to the “early, primarily Jewish, stage of the tradition. It does not necessarily take us back to Jesus of Nazareth” (Willitts 2005:95).

CONCLUSIONS

A survey of sources for the historical Jesus reveals the complex roots of tradition and texts. Each attempt to picture the historical Jesus has utilised criteria often following the preferences of the writer. No criteria have yet enabled a conclusive picture of Jesus. All have strengths and weaknesses, and should be used with caution and in conjunction with each other. It will nevertheless be impossible to achieve certainty on the basis of such criteria. There are clear limitations to the criteria that must be respected. All that can be achieved by such research is a satisfactory degree of plausibility. The existence of such an extensive body of tradition in Christian writings suggests that such plausibility is achievable. Links between Jesus and the church might be tighter than the sceptical position of previous quests suggested. Any study of Jesus that does not regard Jesus as having unique claims understates the power of his life and ministry. The proper use of the criterion of historical plausibility may lead to a better understanding of the Jesus traditions.

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