

One of the most secure conclusions of historical-critical study of the sources for inquiring historically about Jesus is that even the earliest of them are not primary but at best secondary and have the character of engaged witnesses of faith rather than disinterested historical reports. Of course, this is a literary-critical conclusion about the character of our sources, not a historical-critical judgment about what can or cannot be known by controlled inferences from them to the history lying behind them. But if it thus leaves room to use our sources to inquire historically about Jesus, it also renders any such inquiry peculiarly problematic. Because all the sources are at best secondary and are witness, not reportage, any inference from them about Jesus himself can be controlled, if at all, only by yet other inferences of exactly the same kind and therefore must really be controlled, finally, by something else. In other words, in the complete absence of any primary sources, all such inferences beg the question.

Another way of saying this is that one can never make an operational distinction between Jesus as he really was and Jesus as he is represented in the earliest sources about him. Because the only evidence one has for the first is strictly identical with whatever evidence one has for the second, any distinction one may make between them must either remain merely theoretical or else beg the question. But, then, one can never talk historically about what Jesus said and did, as distinct from what he is represented as having said and done by those whose witness to him provides our only sources for talking about him at all.

The significance of this conclusion can be brought home by recalling certain elementary logical distinctions. Not to deny something is different from asserting something, just as not to assert something is different from denying something. Correspondingly, to have sufficient reason not to deny something is different from having sufficient reason to assert something, just as to have sufficient reason not to assert something is different from having sufficient reason to deny something.

Accepting these distinctions, I maintain that the most that the generally accepted criteria for distinguishing authentic Jesus-material entitle one to claim is different from, and considerably less than, what those who

attempt to apply them customarily suppose. Given the conclusion about our sources described above, such criteria may indeed be applied to yield sufficient reason not to deny that a particular unit of tradition is authentic, but they can not possibly be applied to yield sufficient reason to assert that it is authentic.

Consider, for example, the "criterion of dissimilarity" (or of "dual irreducibility"), which at least one prominent New Testament scholar frankly allows to be "the one sure criterion." If a unit of tradition proves irreducible to either a known expression of late Judaism or a known expression of early Christianity, one clearly has sufficient reason not to deny that it is authentic Jesus-material. But just as clearly, one does not thereby have sufficient reason to assert its authenticity. Because all units of tradition are at best secondary and are witness rather than reportage, there is always the possibility that, if yet other expressions either of late Judaism or of early Christianity were known, the unit in question could be reduced to one or the other of them rather than attributed to Jesus.

The moral is obvious: to apply the criterion of dissimilarity (or dual irreducibility) so as to claim that a unit of tradition is authentic Jesus-material is, in reality, to beg the question—the proof of this being that the only reason one can ever give for one's claim cannot possibly be sufficient to assert it, but, at most, sufficient not to deny it.

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