

On Criteria for Distinguishing Authentic Jesus-Material

Not to deny something is different from asserting something, just as not to assert something is different from denying something. Correspondingly, to have a sufficient reason for not denying something is different from having a sufficient reason for asserting something, just as to have a sufficient reason for not asserting something is different from having a sufficient reason for denying something.

With this distinction in mind, I maintain that the most the proposed criteria for distinguishing authentic Jesus-material in the Synoptic tradition ever entitle one to do is different from, and considerably less than, those who propose them customarily suppose. Although such criteria may be employed to show that one has sufficient reason for not denying that a unit of tradition is authentic, they can never succeed in showing that one has a sufficient reason for asserting that it is authentic.

Thus, for example, 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 a sufficient reason for not denying that it is authentic Jesus-material. But just as clearly, one does not thereby have a sufficient reason for asserting its authenticity. For there always remains the possibility that, if other expressions either of late Judaism or of early Christianity were known, it could be reduced to one or the other of them rather than attributed to Jesus.

The moral is obvious: To employ 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

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that the only reasons one can give for one's claim are not sufficient reasons for asserting it but, at most, sufficient reasons for not denying it.

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Conversation with Victor P. Furnish (12 July 1979)

Furnish:

1. There are two factors in practice that ought to be reckoned with: (i) there is a presumptive evidentiary plus in certain things being attributed to Jesus; (ii) a great deal is known about late Judaism and early Christianity.
2. Another point against the criterion: at best it delivers what is distinctive, not what is characteristic.

Response:

1. Of course, I fully recognize the other point against the criterion.
2. (i) Just as there is a difference between a) having reasons to assert something and b) having reasons not to deny it, so there is a difference between b) having reasons not to deny something and c) not having reasons to deny it. If b) is weaker than a), it's stronger than c); and it is so because there is a presumption in favor of the attribution. (ii) No matter how much (or little) is known, the issue is an issue of principle.

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Conversation with John Dominic Crossan (19 March 1980)

There is a definite relevance to the whole discussion of authentic Jesus-material of my reflections on the burden of proof in my discussion with Flew.

Those who assert that a certain parable, say, goes back to Jesus are like the prosecuting attorney who brings a charge in a criminal case. That is,

they thereby assume the burden of proof. The presumption of innocence, on the other hand, covers the position of those who, without denying that the parable in question goes back to Jesus, do not assert that it does. (If you will, they are negative, not positive, a-Jesusists.)

Crossan's whole tactic was like that of a prosecuting attorney who would insist that it was up to the defense to give a reason for the innocence of the accused. But, given the presumption that the accused is innocent until proven guilty, one has the right to demand from those who make the charge of guilt that they assume the burden of proof for that charge.

At some point well after this entry was written, I noted:

Another reason why Crossan's attempt to shift the burden of proof won't work—in addition to the purely logical reason that assertions = negations of denials—is the reason Marxsen gives in *NTBK*: 76 f., viz., that the rule Crossan invokes could be properly applied only where the documents in question intend to be reportage—as, of course, the gospels and the other *NT* writings do not.

ON THE SO-CALLED CRITERION OF DISSIMILARITY OR DUAL IRREDUCIBILITY

Not to deny something is different from asserting something, just as not to assert something is different from denying something. Correspondingly, to have a sufficient reason for not denying something is different from having a sufficient reason for asserting something, just as to have a sufficient reason for not asserting something is different from having a sufficient reason for denying something.

This distinction is evidently pertinent to the so-called criterion of dissimilarity or dual irreducibility, which is proposed for distinguishing authentic Jesus-material in the Synoptic tradition. In fact, this distinction enables one to understand why the most that this criterion ever entitles one to do is different from, and considerably less than, those who propose it customarily suppose. Although the criterion may be employed to show that one has sufficient reason for not denying that a unit of tradition is authentic Jesus-material, it can never succeed in showing that one has a sufficient reason for asserting that the unit in question is authentic Jesus-material.

Thus, for example, if a unit of tradition--a parable, say--proves irreducible either to a known expression of late Judaism or to a known expression of early Christianity, one clearly has a sufficient reason for not denying that it is authentic Jesus-material. But just as clearly, one does not thereby have a sufficient reason for asserting that the parable in question is authentic. For there always remains the possibility that, if expressions either of late Judaism or of early Christianity were known other than those that in fact are known, the parable could be reduced to one or the other of them rather than attributed to Jesus.

The moral is obvious: to employ 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 in the very nature of the case, given the sources upon which one is perforce dependent, the only reasons one can give for one's claim are not sufficient reasons for asserting it but, at most, sufficient reasons for not denying it.