

Scripture, Genre, Narrative, History, Truth and the ‘Historical Jesus’¹

The Problem

One of the challenges of approaching Scripture exegetically is related to the related question of inspiration and inerrancy. Thus when Scripture scholars suggest that the stories of the bible are not always factually accurate in an historical sense, some see that as undermining the truth of the Scriptures.

This is not, in fact, a new question. The early Fathers of the Church had to defend the Scriptures against those who ridiculed them for one reason or another. The clearest defence we find is that by Origen, though he was by no means alone in this quest. Origen argued against a purely literal reading of the Scriptures in various places, particularly in *Contra Celsus* and in *Peri Archon*. Indeed Origen argued that God had placed ‘stumbling blocks’ in the Scriptures in order that readers may be forced to look beyond the literal to the spiritual sense.

Although not an identical position by any means, the PBC’s argument against the fundamentalist reading of Scripture has some similar features, in that they argue that a fundamentalist reading, although appearing to have a ‘high view’ of scripture, in fact fails to respect Scripture by imposing its own view of ‘truth’ on it rather than letting Scripture speak for itself.

Genre

From *Divino Aflante Spiritu* onwards the Church has clearly encouraged scholars to consider the various genres of the writings of scripture in order to read them appropriately. This again is not particularly new, even if it has been stated in a more ‘scientific’, way. Augustine, for example, looked at Genesis and concluded that it might not be possible to read all of it literally, that it was a different sort of writing.

We are, of course, used to Genre. We know, from certain signs, whether a modern piece of writing is intended to be historical or fictional, or

¹ This is a brief attempt to try to spell out some points which I have struggled to express in the past. It is wholly lacking in proper references as I wrote it somewhat ‘off the cuff’. Some of the arguments are somewhat abbreviated. I hope to develop it further at some point.

somewhere between the two. And within the bounds of both ‘factual’ and ‘fictional’ works there are, of course, many further genres. A monograph is different from a textbook. Poetry is different from fantasy etc. etc.

The biblical record contains many different genres, but because they are ancient literature, identifying the genres is less easy at times. None the less there are clues. It is easy enough to see that Genesis 1 is not a scientific cosmology, but that does not make it untrue. It just suggests that its truth is found elsewhere. It is mythical (in a broad sense) and theological.

Story and Character

Much of the Bible is narrative – story. In some places that looks very much like history or biography but we must be careful not to impose on it an understanding of historical writing that is alien to it. This is particularly true if we are to consider the portrayal of God in the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament. An obvious example is the book of Job. The character of god in the opening of Job bears no relation to our theological understanding of the nature of God. A much more satisfactory portrayal (theologically speaking) is found in the final chapters, the god who answers Job out of the whirlwind. Even so, that is just a portrayal that is relevant within that narrative. Neither is ‘erroneous’, but neither is to be taken absolutely literally. They function within the context of the narrative to express something of who God is in his relationship with humanity.

Persons in biblical narratives are also to be seen primarily as characters, and the narrative as whole seeks to communicate some truth about God and God’s relationship with the world. Sometimes we can read the characterisation as literally true, sometimes we cannot, depending on the genre. Some books of the Old Testament are almost certainly fictional (including Job, but we might also add Jonah and Judith), others are more clearly essentially historical in nature, (the books of Samuel and Kings for example) though even these don’t seek first and foremost to narrate history but rather to interpret it. And they also would not conform to the canons of modern historiography, since (for example) they narrate things to which the author could not have been privy. They may not always be factually accurate in an historical sense, but this does not mean they are purely fictitious nor that they are ‘in error’ They are only ‘in error’ if one seeks to impose an alien genre on them. Similarly, the characters in them are first and foremost that – characters in a story. These characters bear some

relationship to the historical characters that lie behind them, but even a carefully researched modern biography is but a portrayal of a person. And the concerns of the ancient writer would seem to be rather different from those of the modern biographer.

The Gospels

Most do not find this too hard to accept for the Old Testament, but what about the New, and in particular the Gospels? Once again we have to ask about genre. First of all, studying the Gospels it becomes clear fairly quickly that they are works that are carefully crafted. Secondly it also becomes clear that while the portrayals of Jesus are clearly complementary rather than contradictory, on a level of detail there are differences which cannot easily be ironed out. This is perhaps particularly acute when it comes to the resurrection narratives. Even Luke, who clearly expresses his desire to write an orderly account, seems not to be sure where the ascension took place – Bethany (Lk 24:50) or the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12)?

Given these two facts the sensible conclusion is that the ‘inaccuracies’ and ‘contradictions’ we appear to find at a level of ‘factual detail’ are not ‘failings’ (or ‘errors’) by the evangelists but rather are symptomatic of the approach of the evangelists in telling the story of Jesus. They are no more ‘inaccurate’ than an impressionist painting is ‘inaccurate’. They are portraits, not biographies. They convey the ‘authentic truth’ (DV 19) about Jesus and about what Jesus said and did, but the Jesus in them is a character in a narrative not a figure in a documentary (and even a documentary involves characterisation).

Knowing this can be liberating, because we don’t always have to translate the behaviour and words of a character in narrative directly back on to the historical character. Thus, for example, the rather strange exchange between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30 is part of an overall narrative of moving away from an exclusivist view of the People of God to a more inclusive view. To ask ‘did Jesus change his mind’ is probably the wrong question. But the crafting of Mark’s narrative is very careful and subtle. For example the reference to crumbs cannot be seen apart from the superabundance of scraps left over from the feeding of the 5000, and which will occur again in the feeding of the 4000 (the story that follows shortly after this one in 8:1-10), and which the disciples will have failed to understand in 8:14-21. One could say similar things about the

characterisation of the disciples in Mark. Were they really that stupid, or are they being caricatured for effect?

Jesus

The famous distinction between the ‘Jesus of history’ and the ‘Christ of faith’ then is perhaps unhelpful in as much as it is incomplete. Rather we can talk about ‘portraits of Jesus’ which we find primarily – but not exclusively – in the Gospels. These have always been held up by the Church as true portraits of the man who lived, ministered and died in the Holy Land in the early years of the Roman Empire. These stories, and various retellings of them by the Church, are the ways we encounter Jesus, which in turn allows us to recognise the living Jesus already in some sense living and present in our lives through the Holy Spirit. But they are not biographies. Once this is recognised some may suggest that the gospels are in fact distortions of the ‘real Jesus’ by the early Church (so e.g Wrede, Hick, Lüdderman) and that somehow we need to strip back the dogma and get back to that ‘real Jesus’. Our answer cannot simply to retreat into a bunker and throw out grenades of condemnation. If we truly believe both in the incarnation and in the continued presence of Christ in the Church, then we have nothing to fear from history.

But the competency and limits of history must also be recognised. Not to do so is the (perhaps understandable) failure of the 19th century writers and of the (frankly incomprehensible) failure of 20th century writers such as Crossan and Lüdemann. Phrases like ‘the sure results of history’ should just make people giggle today. We can nonetheless legitimately ask what the history behind the portraits is, but as that was not the primary aim of the authors (at least in the modern sense of historiography) the results are always going to be provisional. But that does not mean they are not valuable. And indeed the work of more careful scholars of recent years – such as Meier, Wright and Dunn – and some – eg Jeremias – of earlier generations shows that the portraits we have in the Gospels are not a distortion of that history.

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