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Guest Lecture

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The Historical Reliability of the Gospels: a Non-Specialist's Perspective

Introduction

It is my privilege to talk with you this evening on the topic of the historical reliability of the gospels. I want to thank Will Metzger, Carole Bryan, the local chapter of Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship and the Church and Campus Connection for inviting me. At the outset of my comments I wanted to explain to you why I, a non-specialist in Biblical studies (and NT Studies in particular), agreed to tackle this topic.

1. As a Christian I am under obligation to always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within me, per 1st Peter 3:15.

2. As a Christian minister, I am directed by God's Word to preach the Word in season and out of season, per 2nd Timothy 4:1-5; cf. 1st Timothy 4:6-16. While I am a non-specialist in technical NT studies, I am a student of the Bible.

3. I am a doctoral candidate in apologetics and this subject *is* a matter of apologetics. Apologetics, in case you do not know, is the defense of the Christian faith against criticisms and the critique of unbelief from a Christian perspective.

4. I am critical of the cult of specialization that leads to the fragmentation of knowledge. I happen to believe that all knowledge interrelates and that specialization has its benefits. But when the areas of academic specialty become isolated from one another the result is not good.

So here I am, a non-specialist sharing with you my *halting* thoughts about a seriously important matter.

Order of Presentation

We live in momentous days for the Christian faith in America. The Christian faith has captured the imagination of the media in recent months in ways not thought possible. A recent *Newsweek* cover story recorded the demise of the Christian right on its cover.¹ And *Time* Magazine has recently noted the popularity of the so-called “New Calvinism” as well.² More germane for our topic was the recent editorial in the pages of *USA Today* on theological diversity in the Bible.³ Add to this the media attention paid to New Testament text critic Bart Ehrman⁴ and the sensation of Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* novel⁵ and I would have to say that the time could not be more propitious to discuss the historical reliability of the gospels.

¹ John Meacham, “The Decline and Fall of Christian America,” *Newsweek* 13 April 2009.

² David Van Biema, “The New Calvinism” in “10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now,” *Time* 23 March 2009.

³ Tim Krattenmaker, “Belief Diversity in Inevitable-it’s even in the Bible,” *USA Today* 13 April 2009.

⁴ Ehrman has authored a number of books related to our discussion. See the following listed here in chronological order: *The Orthodox Corruption of the Scriptures: The Effect of the Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperOne, 2007); *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question-Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008); and *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don’t Know About Them)* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

⁵ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Anchor, 2003). The related movie brought renewed attention to the book, as the new movie based upon the prequel *Angels and Demons* will also undoubtedly do. And now we have been told that a sequel, *The Lost Symbol*, is due out this fall.

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It is probably a good idea that I put all my cards on the table. You already have some idea of where I come from given my opening remarks. I do not want to present myself as some neutral, unbiased or uncommitted individual looking at the issue of the historical reliability of the gospels. The answer to this question matters very much to me. Of course nobody is unbiased. However, I do believe in the existence of objective truth. Please note that I do believe in universal truth, but not because I am smart enough to have figured it all out. On the contrary, what truth I know about the Christian faith is the result of God's great grace. I come to you tonight from the perspective that the Triune God of the Bible, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is in fact the God who exists and that the Bible is his communication to us about himself and his will for us. *To put it concisely, I believe that the Bible is the Word of God in the words of men.*⁶ I also believe that divine superintendence of the process of inspiration is such that human instrumentality *does not negate, mitigate, or undermine* the divine initiative and substance of Scripture.⁷ I believe in a universe governed by God in which miracles cannot be ruled out of order in advance of an examination of the evidence. I hope to show you that this fact has not always been honored by scholars of the NT. I believe the biblical God rules the universe and history. In fact, I believe that if one denies the God of Scripture who rules over history, one cannot even account for the way things are or how historical studies could even be conducted. I also hold to a particular form of the Christian faith. I am not coming to you as some sort of generic, garden variety of Christian. I am a confessional, Reformed Christian. I made reference a few moments ago to the *Time* story in which it was noted that there is a new movement called the "new Calvinism." I classify myself as an Old Calvinist of the Presbyterian variety. OK. That is out of the way. Let's turn to the topic at hand.

⁶ This is the language of George Eldon Ladd in his book *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 19ff.

⁷ See the various discussions relating the Enns controversy at Westminster Theological Seminary.

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I propose to discuss the historical reliability of the gospels in the following way: (1) I will address some basic problems with the historical claims of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*⁸ (2) then I will discuss the transmission of the New Testament text and how it can be said that we have a reliable text of the NT at all⁹ and finally (3) I will briefly discuss the history of Gospels critical studies with a view to evaluating the presuppositions that color academic assessment of their reliability.¹⁰ I do not pretend to offer anything like a full treatment of these issues, but I hope to show that the NT gospels are indeed reliable.

Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code

I begin with Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* because it is the least technical aspect of this issue and its popularity is pervasive throughout our culture. There is no doubt that this is a popular book and having read it I can attest to its character as a real page turner. It was a hard

⁸ I found the following materials helpful in my preparation for this section: Richard Abanes, *The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code: A Challenging Response to the Bestselling Novel* (Irvine: Harvest House, 2004); Darrell L. Bock, "A Christian Analysis of Da Vinci Code: What Dan Brown Did Not Tell You-Three Errors Plus a Few More" at www.thetruthaboutdavinci.com and accessed on 24 April 2009; Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everyone's Asking* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006); James L. Garlow, *The Da Vinci Codebreaker: An Easy-to-Use Fact Checker* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 2006); James L. Garlow and Peter Jones, *Cracking Da Vinci's Code: You've Read the Fiction, Now Read the Facts* (Chicago: David C. Cook, 2004); Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Da Vinci Deception* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2006); Gary Williams, *The Da Vinci Code: From Dan Brown's Fiction to Mary Magdalene's Faith* (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2006); Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004); and the DVD *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Solves the 2000 Year Old Mystery* (Grizzly Adams Productions, 2005).

⁹ I found the following titles helpful in my preparation for this segment: J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); and Bruce Manning Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). Especially enlightening was Daniel B. Wallace's recent *JETS* article, "Challenges in New Testament Textual Criticism for the Twenty-First Century." I am working from a pre-publication form of the article provided by the author.

¹⁰ I consulted the following titles in preparation for this section: Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus: a Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues & Commentary* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987); Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues & Commentary* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001); Ned B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels: Some Basic Questions* (London: Tyndale House, 1964); Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Roots of Gospels Criticism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1995); Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate About the Messianic Consciousness*. 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2002); and N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

book to put down. There have been several Christian responses to Brown and so I make no claim to originality with what I say here. If I can make a shameless plug for my school, there are two very helpful websites devoted to Brown's books. The first is www.thetruthaboutdavinci.com and a new site that will be up and running as of 13 May 2009 is the companion www.thetruthaboutangelsanddemons.com. I would recommend these two sites for the helpful information they provide.

As has been pointed out by several writers, there are some basic historical errors propagated in the book.¹¹ NT scholar Darrell Bock, research professor of NT Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, has indicted that there are three main historical blunders in Brown. The first error is that Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalene. As Bock notes, this idea is not based on any evidence in the canonical Gospels, but is an inference drawn from two non-canonical writings, the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* 17:10-18:21 and the *Gospel of Phillip* 63:33-36. Note that I said Brown has drawn inferences from these texts. I use that language because I believe they are wrong inferences. Both of these non-canonical gospels record that Jesus had a special relationship to Mary. One text calls Mary Jesus' "companion"¹² and Brown appeals to the Phillip text for the idea that Jesus kissed Mary on the lips. And Brown, once again, infers from this that Jesus and Mary must have been married.

That Mary Magdalene is a significant disciple is no doubt true. She was among the women who first met the risen Lord. This fact would account for her designation by some as the "apostle to the apostles." She was sent (which is what "apostle" means) to tell the apostles about the resurrection. That is indeed a real honor. However, the historical credibility of these two

¹¹ Bock, "A Christian Analysis," pagination mine, 1.

¹² Bock, "A Christian Analysis," 2.

non-canonical gospels is in question, even by non-Christian scholars.¹³ And as Bock points out, even should the documents prove historically valuable, they do not teach what Brown infers from them. That Mary was a companion points to a special relationship, but marriage is in no way naturally inferred. With regard to the kiss, the Phillip text is actually missing a word where the text tells us *where* Mary was kissed.¹⁴ In the end, the texts do not unambiguously claim that Jesus was married.

Second, Dan Brown tells us that the four canonical gospels were chosen from among eighty because they present a picture of a divine Christ as over against a purely human Christ in the other gospels not chosen.¹⁵ Additionally Brown alleges that these four canonical gospels were chosen late around the time of the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.¹⁶ First, it should be noted that the four gospels were seen as authoritative in the church long before Nicaea. Bock points out that at the end of the second century the bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus, referred to the fourfold gospel as akin to the four corners of the globe and the four winds in his *Adversus Haeresus*.¹⁷ It should also be noted that Tatian's *Diatessaron*, an attempted harmony of the gospels in AD 170, failed to take hold in the church because the four gospels had already become firmly rooted.¹⁸ Beyond these facts, we can point to the Alexandrian church father Origen's early third century *First Homily to Luke* where he mentions, regarding Luke 1:1, that the church does not read books like the *Gospel of Thomas* because they lack authority¹⁹ and earlier the apologist Justin Martyr described the gospels in his *First Apology* as "memoirs" of the apostles.²⁰ It is true

¹³ Bock, "A Christian Analysis," 2.

¹⁴ Bock, "A Christian Analysis," 2.

¹⁵ Bock, "A Christian Analysis," 3.

¹⁶ Bock, "A Christian Analysis," 3.

¹⁷ Which can be translated as "Against Heresies." This passage referring to the fourfold gospel is found at 3.11.8.

¹⁸ Bock, "A Christian Analysis," 3.

¹⁹ Bock, "A Christian Analysis," 3.

²⁰ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 66:3.

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that the first full listing of all 27 books of the New Testament as we know it did not appear until AD 367 in Athanasius' Easter Festal letter. However, what I have just mentioned should reveal that the church had a firm grasp on the four canonical gospels long before this.

What do we say about the selection of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John out of a plethora of eighty gospels? We have already cast a shadow of doubt upon Dan Brown's idea that the four canonical gospels were chosen late (perhaps at the Council of Nicaea at the behest of Emperor Constantine?), but were there really eighty gospels to pick and choose from? Darrell Bock is quick to say that this number is a "gross exaggeration."²¹ He continues to point out that we currently possess about 24 works called gospels from the early centuries of the Christian era and possibly another 12 if we add books that discuss Jesus but do not call themselves "gospels."²²

What about Brown's assertion that the canonical gospels were chosen because they presented a divine Christ whereas the others presented a human Jesus? Is there any truth to this? The interesting thing about many of these other gospels is that they are Gnostic gospels (Gnosticism was a syncretistic philosophy/religion that arose in the 2nd century of the Christian era. As syncretistic, it blended Greek philosophical ideas with both Jewish and Christian ideas. It was perhaps the most significant challenge to orthodox Christianity in the early days of the church. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, wrote his *Adversus Haeresus* against this movement with its confusing cosmologies and genealogies). These Gnostic gospels presented a Jesus whom we might characterize as way too divine and not sufficiently human at all. For Gnostics, spirit could not mix with flesh as flesh was matter and inherently bad. Bock points out that this aspect of

²¹ Bock, "A Christian Analysis," 3.

²² Bock, "A Christian Analysis," 3.

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Gnostic teaching is clearly seen in such works as the *Apocalypse of Peter* 81:4-24 and the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* 56:6-19. He says, “What they teach is that Jesus was in heaven laughing as the crucifixion took place because people mistakenly thought they were crucifying Jesus. This is a Jesus who is too divine and cannot be human, a view known as Docetism.”²³

I will try to briefly dispense with the third alleged fact in Brown’s novel. It might appear that this has nothing to do with the gospel portrait of Christ, but that would be wrong. Why? Because Brown builds his case upon the previous assertion that the four canonical gospels were chosen at Nicaea because they suited the bishops and the emperor just fine. But if the canonical gospels were not chosen late nor chosen simply for political expediency, then why should we also believe that the central affirmation of the New Testament that Jesus is divine was settled by the Nicaean council in AD 325? The truth is that the council was called to settle the dispute about the Arian heresy. Arianism taught that Jesus was merely a creature. He was the greatest creature to be sure and the creature through whom the rest of creation came into existence. But he was a creature nonetheless and not God in any meaningful sense. The council determined that Arianism was heretical and not sound theology. As for the vote being close, the vote was either 214-2 or 314-2 depending upon how many bishops actually attended. As Bock notes, the divinity of Jesus Christ was a fundamental belief from the earliest documents we have. “One can look at the writing of Paul (1 Cor 8:5-6; Phil 2:9-11), the unknown author of Hebrews (Heb 1:1-3), the author of Revelation (Rev 1:1-7 and chapters 4-5), the gospel of John (John 1:1-18), or Jesus’ own testimony at his Jewish examination (Mark 14:62-65 and parallels) to see that the claim was that Jesus was at the side of God in a position of status equal to His, receiving worship as He does. These works all date from anywhere from the sixties to the nineties of the first

²³ Bock, “A Christian Analysis,” 4.

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century.”²⁴ Bock goes on to remind us that we can also refer to the testimony of Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia under Roman emperor Trajan who wrote to Trajan around AD 117 that the Christians he was familiar with sang hymns to Jesus as a god.²⁵

What does one make of all this? Perhaps we should listen to Dan Brown when he tells us that the *DaVinci Code* is just fiction. Surely we cannot take his claims to weave historical fact into a well-told tale of fiction at face value.

Transmission of the New Testament Text

Now we need to switch gears a bit. If the previous discussion was not technical enough for you, I guarantee this section of the discussion will tickle your technical fancy! In this part of the lecture I want us to learn about the transmission of the text of the New Testament, with a special concern for the Gospels. Many seem to wonder how we can have a reliable New Testament text when copies of the Bible were copied by hand until the invention of the movable type printing press and printing of the first Bible in 1456. Do we really have a reliable text before us as we read our English Bibles? Is the Greek text we turn to accurate? These are good and legitimate questions. The recent attention paid to Bart Ehrman reminds me that text criticism is not nearly as insignificant as we might imagine.²⁶ Let me just comment in passing that the invention of the printing press did not eliminate errors! As a former book buyer at the Westminster Seminary bookstore I had the job of reviewing books for our store website and I remember a volume that had been published in honor of a retiring faculty member. I distinctly remember thinking the content of the book was superb but that finding multiple typos on nearly

²⁴ Bock, “A Christian Analysis,” 4-5.

²⁵ Bock, “A Christian Analysis,” 5.

²⁶ The Wallace article cited earlier is eye-opening about the new fashionability of New Testament text criticism. To put it briefly, text critical studies are hot!

every page of the book was irritating. Has anyone here ever heard of the “adultery Bible”? Back in the time of the post Reformation era a printer of an English Bible accidentally left out the “not” in “Thou shalt *not* commit adultery”!²⁷ I believe that printer learned his lesson as he paid a penalty for that oversight. The computer is a wonderful tool. However it has not eliminated all errors as the book I just mentioned illustrates.

It needs to be stressed that ready access to books (or the ancient equivalents of scrolls and codexes) was not the experience of the average Christian. The fact that books were hand-copied meant that possession of a book like the Bible was a costly venture. For instance, Professor Bruce Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary tells us in his masterpiece, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, that the price of a whole Bible in the ancient Roman world would cost approximately 30,000 denarii. Realize that a legionnaire (a Roman soldier) on the average earned 750 denarii annually.²⁸ According to my calculations, it would take a Roman legionnaire 40 years to earn enough money to purchase a hand-copied Bible! And that is how long it would take if he didn’t use any of his income for other things-like living! I guess we can be thankful for the printing press even though all human error has not been eliminated.

What exactly was the process for transmitting the New Testament and is it really realistic to think we have a reliable text? I do think it is realistic to think we have more than merely an adequate text. Let’s consider the process of transmission. The apostle or apostolic companion

²⁷ This Bible was also known as the “Wicked Bible,” the “adulterous Bible,” and the “sinner’s Bible.” According to the internet encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, this Bible was printed in 1631 by Barker and Lucas. This particular printing of the Bible “omits an important ‘not’ from Exodus 20:14, making the seventh commandment read ‘Thou shalt commit adultery.’ And also contains an error in Deuteronomy 5:24 that replaces the word ‘greatness’ with ‘great arse’ in a passage referring to God, rendering the passage ‘The Lord hath showed us his glory and his great arse.’ The printers were fined £300 and most of the copies were recalled immediately. Only 11 copies are known to exist today. This entry is found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_errata. Accessed 2 May 2009.

²⁸ Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 15.

would pen a book or letter and that document is known today as an *autograph*. Now I happen to believe in biblical inerrancy.²⁹ That is the view that God has so superintended the inspiration of the writing of the Bible that no error has entered into the writing of the original document. Understand that many NT scholars ridicule the idea of an autographical text. Some Evangelicals even refer to the autograph as “hypothetical.” Why should the idea of autographs be hypothetical? There had to be a first form of the document and the fact that we no longer physically possess the autograph copies of the NT books should not count against their existence at some point in earlier history. Besides, given that the science of text criticism is the science of *restoring* a given text to its *original form* at least seems to demand that an autograph of each book of the Bible existed at one time. After all, how would we know if we had achieved a restored text without autographs?³⁰

This reminds me that I forgot to discuss the very idea of text criticism. Before we continue with our examination of the transmission of the NT text it would be wise to consider what textual criticism is. Let me just say that there are different forms of criticism. Perhaps you have already encountered the terms “higher” and “lower” criticism? These expressions are not particularly helpful. We will be looking in the third and final section of this lecture at some forms of higher or literary criticism. Here we are considering textual criticism. Textual criticism is the science of restoring a corrupt text to its original form or at least getting as close to its original form as is possible. Textual criticism is not a discipline limited to the Scriptures. All ancient literature copied by hand requires the practice of this science in order to obtain a reliable text.

²⁹ The latest issues of the *Westminster Theological Journal* and *Themelios* remind us that the debate over inerrancy in evangelical circles is hardly a dead issue.

³⁰ Wallace points to the need to hold to the existence of autographs because recent scholarship has tended to blur the distinction between the autographs and later developments with copies. See “Challenges,” 3ff.

Did you know that we possess approximately 5,760 copies of various lengths of the New Testament?³¹ This plethora of MSS allows us to crosscheck copies to ascertain accuracy. To give you some idea of the wealth of MSS we have, consider the fact that some standard ancient texts, of which we have little doubt that we possess reliable copies, stand upon much smaller quantities of texts. Additionally, these other ancient texts stand at quite a distance from their autographs. Consider these thoughts from NT text critic J. Harold Greenlee:

Although the science of textual criticism is useful in the study of any piece of ancient literature, the most important branch of textual criticism is that which pertains to the New Testament. This is true for three inter-related reasons. In the first place, the N.T. is the most important piece of ancient literature. In the second place, the number of available mss. of the N.T. is overwhelmingly greater than those of any other work of ancient literature. In the third place, the earliest extant mss. of the N.T. were written much closer to the date of the original writing than is the case in almost any other piece of ancient literature.³²

Greenlee goes on to say,

The two latter points may be illustrated by a comparison. The plays of Aeschylus are known in some fifty mss., the works of Sophocles in one hundred, the Greek anthology and Annals of Tacitus in one ms. each, the poems of Catullus in three mss. of independent value; while there are a few hundred known mss. of the works of Euripides, Cicero, Ovid, and Virgil. In the case of the N. T., in sharp

³¹ Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 36, notes 5,000. Wallace, "Challenge," provides the more recent figure, 29.

³² Greenlee, *Introduction*, 15.

contrast, there are over 4800 extant mss. in Greek, 8000 in Latin and 1000 in other languages.³³

Concerning the time frame between the copies and their originals, we are told that,

...the oldest known mss. of most of the Greek classical authors are dated a thousand years or more after the author's death. The time interval for the Latin authors is somewhat less, varying down to a minimum of three centuries in the case of Virgil. In the case of the N.T., however, two of the most important mss. were written within 300 years after the N.T. was completed, and some virtually complete N.T. books as well as extensive fragmentary mss. of many parts of the N.T. date back to one century from the original writings.³⁴

Getting back to the transmission process, we realize that the various books of the N.T. had to be hand-copied and that means that errors were likely to creep in and did in fact occur. While I affirm God's providential care of the transmission of the Bible, I do not believe that his care operates in the same way as the original inspiration of the autographs.³⁵ In fact we know that the various mss. we possess have variations from one another and the science of textual criticism has to establish an elaborate process for assessing the various mss. These errors can be classified as intentional and unintentional. The intentional errors (viewed by the copyists as "corrections" no doubt) could be due to the desire to correct what appeared to be an erroneous reading, a desire to correct a doctrinally questionable reading or to harmonize one gospel reading, for instance, with another. Unintentional errors arose for various and sundry reasons. Remember that the copying of ancient texts could involve one copyist reading from an original

³³ Greenlee, *Introduction*, 16.

³⁴ Greenlee, *Introduction*, 16.

³⁵ Wallace, "Challenge," makes a strong case for a difference between inspiration and providence. See 22ff.

or it might involve, in the case of a Scriptorium, one scribe reading from the master document and several copyists copying the duplicates. Either method could yield unintentional errors. The copyist could hear incorrectly or have trouble distinguishing words that sounded alike. The copyist working with one document could jump from one line with a certain combination of letters to another line with the same combination of letters (we even have a name for this, “homoioteleuton”).³⁶ We could talk from now until eternity of various reasons for copyist error. We know it happened. We have the evidence.

But how does a text critic go about addressing these copyist errors? How does one know the difference between an error and an accurate reading? As you might expect, textual critics have developed this process down to a literal science. Here I offer a very brief notice of some of the guidelines developed over time that help critics to get at the best restored text possible. (1) *The shorter reading is preferable.* The tendency of scribes is to expand rather than reduce the text. (2) *The harder reading is preferable.* The tendency of copyists is to clean up otherwise rough readings. (3) *The reading from which others in a variant would have more than likely developed is preferable.* (4) *The reading which is characteristic of the author is preferable.* (5) *The reading from the more reliable text family is preferable.*³⁷ As you can see, these scientific rules require a fair amount of art in applying them. Nevertheless these provide some basic guidelines for determining where an error has crept into a text.

At the end of the day I think it can be said that we possess a very accurate and reliable text of the NT. And it should be said that no “cardinal” Christian doctrine is in danger in this

³⁶ Greenlee, *Introduction*, 63.

³⁷ Greenlee, *Introduction*, 114-134.

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whole question.³⁸ Given the massive numbers of mss that we possess, the closeness in proximity of the copies we have to the original autographs, and the textual critical science as it has been perfected, we can rely upon the Greek texts and the English translations that rest on them.³⁹

The History of Gospels Critical Studies

Having looked at a contemporary challenge to the reliability of the New Testament in the shape of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, and then having considered the transmission of the NT text and how we can recover an accurate and reliable form of the text from copies, we now come to an examination of the history of critical studies of the gospels. The history of the critical treatment of the Gospels is a history of philosophical presuppositions being allowed to run roughshod over the NT text and being passed off as unbiased scientifically assured results. As with the previous two segments, I have to be *very* selective here.

Contemporary critical treatment of the NT and Gospels in particular goes back to the rise of the Enlightenment in the 17th century, and even before that in the Renaissance.⁴⁰ The Enlightenment (known as the *Aufklärung* in Germany and the *Le siècle des lumières* in France) has come to be known as the “age of reason” because during this period of time reason became not only the instrument by which we come to know truth but it also became the standard of what could possibly even be true. The maxim of the day was the cry of Protagorus, “Homo mensura,” or “man the measure.” The goal of the Enlightenment philosopher was to bring all beliefs, doctrines and views to the bar of human reason. Nothing from the past could be revered simply

³⁸ Wallace, “Challenge” nuances the standard Evangelical argument by adding the word “cardinal” to the line that no doctrine is cast in a shadow, 23.

³⁹ Understand that I do not consider Ehrman an honest text critic. He is, however, a scholar many read and is therefore popular. See Wallace, “Challenge,” for perceptive comments about Ehrman. Also note that Reformed Baptist apologist James White has recently debated Ehrman. The DVD of that debate can be found here: http://www.aomin.org/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=48.

⁴⁰ Strimple, *Modern Search*, 6.

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because it was tradition. Immanuel Kant called upon people to free themselves from their self-incurred slavery to external authorities. If there was any authority that came in for questioning in this age it was the Bible and the Christian church.

In this context modern critical approaches to the NT and the life of Christ came into vogue. As Robert Strimple, professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California has noted, Enlightenment driven NT scholarship falls into two basic camps: the Liberal and the radical.⁴¹ What distinguishes these two approaches to NT critical studies? In a nutshell, the Liberal approach looks to the person of Jesus, in some way, shape, or form, for providing the creative inspiration for the formation of the NT. The radical approach, on the other hand, sees the creative inspiration for the formation of the NT completely in the hands of the early church. What unites the Liberal and radical critical approaches is that neither school accepts the *prima facie* reading of the NT itself. For various and sundry reasons what the NT itself reveals about Jesus and the early church can't possibly be correct.

While Ernst Troeltsch was hardly present at the inception of the Enlightenment driven critical reading of the NT, he has provided a distillation of its principles in a handy format.⁴² Robert Strimple nicely summarizes these principles,

In an essay written almost a century after Kant's death, Ernst Troeltsch provided a definitive summary of three primary principles that have guided the historical criticism spawned by the Enlightenment: (1) *The principle of methodological doubt*. All historical judgments (including those made concerning the events recorded in the Bible) can only be statements of probability, which are always

⁴¹ Strimple, *Modern Search*, 115ff.

⁴² Strimple, *Modern Search*, 7.

open to revision. They can never be regarded as absolutely true. (2) *The principle of analogy.* All historical events are, in principle (in “quality”) similar. Thus, ‘present experience and occurrence become the criteria of probability in the past.’ The result with regard to our judgments regarding the factuality of miracles recorded in the Bible, when ‘Jewish and Christian history are thus made analogous to all other history,’ is obvious. In our present experience, ax heads do not float, nor do five loaves and two fish suffice to feed five thousand people. (3) *The principle of correlation.* All historical phenomena exist in a chain of cause and effect, and therefore are mutually interrelated and interdependent. There is no effect without an adequate and sufficient cause. The Kantian philosophical roots of these basic methodological principles, and how they eliminate from consideration *a priori* the truth claims of Christianity and the possibility of revelation, miracles, or any direct divine activity in human history, should be clear.⁴³

Let me make the Kantian connection clear if it is not already so for you. Immanuel Kant had argued that there was a noumenal/phenomenal distinction in reality. In other words, the human mind could not know extra mental reality in and of itself. The German expression for what we cannot know is the *ding an sich selbst*, the thing in itself. If any of you have been exposed to the study of epistemology, the study of how humans know what they know, you will be familiar with the subject/object distinction. Here Kant says that the subject cannot know the object as it is itself. But you may be wondering what all this has to do with critical studies of the Gospels. I say much in every way! Kant held that the human mind faces a buzzing, blooming chaos and

⁴³ Strimple, *Modern Search*, 7.

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that the human mind brings categories like space and time to bear on this reality out there outside the mind. So we humans do not come into contact with reality as it is, but only as it *appears* to us. Reality as it appears to us is called the phenomenal realm. Reality as it is in itself is called the noumenal realm. Interestingly enough, one of the things placed in the noumenal realm, beyond access to the human mind, is God. So we can't know God and more importantly God can't communicate with us. And some think that even if God could communicate with us, we wouldn't be able to make sense of it. At the end of the day Kant reduced Christianity to ethics. The fact of the matter is that philosophical influences have been at play in biblical studies all along.

Now I would like to consider the specific principles for a few moments. Consider with me the first principle: methodological doubt. All historical judgments are only probable, open for revision. Is that true for the principle itself? Is the principle of methodological doubt doubttable? What about the principle of analogy? From where does one come up with that idea? Yes, it is generally true that the future will be much like the past. But as your stock broker will tell you, past performance is no guarantee of future success. Are there no unusual events, one of a kind singularities that occur in the world? I would argue that this principle is premised upon the uniformity of nature. However, what accounts for that? I say the God of the Bible accounts for that. In Genesis 8:20-9:17 we are told that God entered into a covenant with Noah after the flood to uphold seasons. That is the basis of uniformity. And what shall we say about the principle of correlation? This appears to be Troeltsch's way of describing what is called the "PSR" or principle of sufficient reason. Every effect must have a cause. Now what Troeltsch does not exactly spell out is that this principle says that every effect must have a *naturalistic* cause. That is, every effect in the world must be explainable in terms of natural causes. But how does one

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justify that notion? You can see that these principles rule out miracles in general and in particular the miracle of the incarnation of the Son of God and his resurrection as well. Things like that just don't happen in a closed universe.

An example of a NT scholar who let his philosophy run away with his exegesis is Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860). Baur was a disciple of G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel taught that the spirit is working itself out in history, going through a process called the dialectic. The first stage of this process is called the thesis. The thesis is then contradicted by the antithesis and then a resolution is reached through synthesis. Baur is an example of the radical school of NT interpretation. For instance, because John presented the incarnation of a deity he could not possibly be historically trustworthy. One can see the Hegelian mindset at work in Baur's reconstruction of the book of Acts. Rather than accepting the teaching of the book, Baur held that the author, whoever that might be, could not be telling the truth. He had a *tendenz*. That is, Acts is a "party document."⁴⁴ Reality, as far as Baur was concerned, was quite different. The early church actually had two warring parties, the Petrine or Jewish party and the Pauline or Hellenistic party. Some of the disputes are readily apparent in Acts and in Paul's letter to the Galatians. So here you see the thesis of the Petrine party countered by the antithesis of the Pauline party. According to Baur these become resolved with the rise of early Catholicism. Baur is an example of a philosophy looking for a Scriptural text.

An example of a classical Liberal is Adolf Von Harnack (1851-1930). Harnack was a brilliant theologian and church historian. He also was a biblical scholar of no mean achievements. Harnack, under the general influence of the Kantian noumenal/phenomenal distinction, the theology of Freiderich Schleiermacher, and the anti-metaphysical N.T. studies of

⁴⁴ Strimple, *Modern Search*, 39.

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Albrecht Ritschl, denied that Jesus was the incarnation of the Son of God. Rather, Jesus was the fairest flower of humanity with a very strong God consciousness. He taught three things: The coming of the kingdom of God, the Fatherhood of God and the infinite value of the human soul, and a higher righteousness and the commandment of love.⁴⁵ Once again we see the reduction of Christianity to ethics. Harnack dismissed the gospel of John out of hand as historically useless. But he had some use for the Synoptics. However, one has to separate the kernel from its husk. Those ideas Jesus shared with his contemporaries are husk. Only those ideas unique to Jesus were the kernel. Harnack went so far as to say, “The Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only, and not with the Son.”⁴⁶ Had we the time I would like to put that comment to the test with an examination of the biblical data. I guess we will let Harnack off easy.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) is a NT scholar who is best known for his project of demythologization. No modern man, he said, in the age of the wireless radio, could believe in the miracles of the Bible. But Bultmann was also influenced by philosophy. In his case it was the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Bultmann saw the NT as teaching the necessity of authentic living. It did not matter whether Jesus Christ actually rose from the dead bodily. What mattered was whether he rose in a person’s heart allowing authentic existence.⁴⁷ Bultmann had many brilliant insights into the text of the NT. I should note that because we are all made in God’s image and in live in God’s world and are confronted with both general and special revelation, even unbelieving scholars get some things right. It is worth your while to read some of these critical scholars. However, read with critical discernment.

⁴⁵ Strimple, *Modern Search*, 103ff.

⁴⁶ Harnack, *What is Christianity?* Thomas Bailey Saunders, tr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 144.

⁴⁷ Strimple, *Modern Search*, 123.

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Lest you all think that these critical treatments of the NT are a thing of the past. Let me remind you that they are not. Think of the Jesus Seminar. Can you imagine God asking a cadre of radical NT scholars to vote on the authenticity of his Son's sayings? You will remember that the Jesus Seminar would vote on Jesus' sayings with colored beads or marbles. There were red, pink, gray, and black beads. Red was most assuredly authentic, pink was probably or possibly authentic. Gray was probably not authentic and black was most assuredly not authentic.⁴⁸ One of my favorite principles or criteria of authenticity at work among the Jesus Seminar was the criteria of dissimilarity. A saying of Jesus was most assuredly authentic if it was not like the Jewish tradition in which he was reared or like the teaching of the early church which followed him. Only sentiments Jesus didn't learn from his Jewish heritage or which he failed to pass on to his church are authentic. Am I the only one here who thinks that is nonsensical? We should not be surprised if this reduced the authentic sayings to the drab and non-communicable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have looked at the popular challenge of Dan Brown's *DaVinci Code*, we have also looked at the transmission of the NT text and how it can be said that we have a reliable text, and we have considered some examples of NT scholars who let their philosophy guide their NT studies. At the end of the day I have to say that what looked like perilous attacks on the integrity of the Bible and the NT in particular, turn out to be tendentious treatments of the Scriptures themselves. I would suggest that we have a reliable text of the NT. In fact, I would argue that it is not only reliable, but it is inerrant. But that is a lecture for another time and place. You may have noticed that I did not myself delve into the NT text. Just so you don't think I have fallen down on the job, I will take up one recent attempt to show contradiction in the NT. Tom

⁴⁸ Strimple, *Modern Search*, 2.

Krattenmaker in his recent USA Today editorial about theological diversity in the Bible referenced the work of text critic Bart Ehrman.⁴⁹ To say that Ehrman would sharply disagree with my talk tonight would be a gross understatement!⁵⁰ Ehrman has suggested that the accounts of Jesus' crucifixion are at odds with one another. Mark recounts a Jesus who is out of his mind, at wits end, crying out to God in utter abandonment (Mark 15:21-41). Luke, on the other hand, portrays a serene Jesus who looks out for the welfare of the repentant criminal on one other crosses (Luke 23:26-49). How can these accounts be accurate when they paint such contradictory pictures? My response to this is not original. I heard it from Dr. R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY and a radio commentator. He simply pointed out that Jesus hung on the cross for three hours and that it is quite likely that Jesus experienced the whole gamut of emotions while undergoing the utterly vile death of the cross. Is it not possible that he may have cried out to the Father in distress as he felt the spiritual pangs of abandonment and then felt relief as he commended his spirit to the Father when he had completed his work?

I will grant that there are puzzles in the Bible that are challenges to the believer to understand. But that does not mean that Scripture is not true in all it teaches. However, at the end of the day I believe the God of the Bible is utterly trustworthy and true and so is his word to us. There are many things I have not mentioned this evening. I have not mentioned that God created us for fellowship with him and that through our father Adam we have fallen into sin and are in rebellion against God. And a great part of our fallen sinful nature involves intellectual confusion as we see all around us in our own day. I did not mention that the whole reason the Son of God took to himself a human nature was so he could save a people for himself. I mention it now.

⁴⁹ Krattenmaker, "Diversity," 1.

⁵⁰ Again, see Wallace, "Challenge,".

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Salvation involves restoration of our fallen intellects as much as anything else. The Bible was given for a reason and that was not to satisfy our curiosity. Revelation is tied to redemption. If you want to truly understand the written Word of God you must come to know truly the living Word, Jesus Christ. When the Holy Spirit turns you to Christ in faith you will then be on your way to learning and wrestling with the Bible. At the end of the day, C. S. Lewis and his famed “trilemma” is correct. Once we understand that the Scriptures provide a reliable and accurate picture of Jesus Christ, we must come to the conclusion that he is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. I believe the evidence points to him as Lord. I invite you to check out the Scriptures and see if this is so. Join me on the journey. That journey takes us down a trustworthy and reliable path.

Thank you very much for taking the time to listen to me this evening.

Texts about the nature of Scripture: 2nd Tim. 3:10-17; 2nd Peter 1:16-21; Matt 11:25-27; Heb 1:1-3