

“AUTHENTIC” OR “AUTHORITATIVE”? WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

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In gospel studies one frequently comes across such terms as “authentic,” “nonauthentic,” “authoritative,” and even “nonauthoritative.” There is, however, considerable confusion as to exactly what these terms mean. For instance, are “authentic” and “authoritative” synonyms? Are “nonauthentic” and “nonauthoritative” also synonyms? And are “authentic” and “nonauthoritative” likewise antonyms?

The occasion for such terminology is the well-known fact that sayings of Jesus found in parallel accounts of the synoptic gospels frequently differ in wording. An example of this is the words of Jesus to the paralytic he healed in Capernaum. We find the following:

Matt 8:2—“Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”

Mark 2:5—“My son, your sins are forgiven.”

Luke 5:20—“Man, your sons are forgiven you.”

Although there is no essential difference between the three accounts, it is evident that they are all slightly different from one another. Since it is evident that Jesus at the same time and place did not say all three versions of this saying to the same man,¹ it is quite natural to seek if possible to ascertain the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus—that is, the actual words that the historical Jesus said on this occasion. The question of exactly what Jesus said involves the question of authenticity. The attempt to discern what is authentic is therefore the attempt to arrive at the exact words that Jesus of Nazareth actually said before his resurrection on this particular occasion.² Fortunately, historical research has provided various tools

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¹Hypothetically of course this is possible, but for this writer such a “solution” for the differences we encounter in the parallel accounts in our gospels would raise far more problems than it would solve.

²In defining “authentic” in this way we clearly reject the existential interpretation offered by J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1959) 99 n. 3: “One may however observe that material regarded as wholly ‘unauthentic’ in terms of positivistic historiography may not seem nearly as ‘unauthentic’ in terms of modern [i.e. existential] historiography. For a saying which Jesus never spoke may well reflect accurately his historical significance, and in this sense be more ‘historical’ [i.e. authentic] than many irrelevant things Jesus actually spoke.” An ancient parallel to this way of thinking is found in Plutarch *Solon* 27.1. Here Plutarch accepts as historical the meeting of Solon and Croesus even though he knew that they lived at different times, so that such a meeting was in fact impossible. But he accepted the “historicity” of this meeting because it was so true to the characters of both men that he would not reject it on the trivial grounds of the “so-called canons of chronology.”

Robinson’s definition, however, far from adding clarity to the discussion, would clearly add endless and hopeless confusion to the situation by making all questions of authenticity dependent on a subjective decision of what “turns him or her on.” Whatever the weaknesses of our definition, this option has many more.

to aid in such an investigation.³

An example of this type of investigation by the present author appeared in *JETS* in 1979.⁴ In my article Jesus' sayings on divorce were investigated, and it was determined that the sayings of Jesus found in Mark 10:11, Luke 16:18 and 1 Cor 7:10-11, which contain no "exception clause," were more "authentic" than the parallels in Matt 5:31-32 and 19:9, which both contain the famous "exception clause." By this was meant that the sayings in Mark, Luke and 1 Corinthians were closer to the actual words spoken by the historical Jesus than those recorded in Matthew. This then conversely means that the Matthean versions of these sayings are "less authentic." Yet it was pointed out clearly in this article that "less" or "nonauthentic" did not mean "nonauthoritative":

Matthew has therefore done us a great and most useful service. Led by the Spirit, he reveals to us that when Jesus uttered these words he was not seeking in one sentence to lay down a law to cover every situation. On the contrary he was giving us a general principle rather than the "letter of the law." Is Matthew's interpretation a corruption of Jesus' teaching or a clarification of it? Our decision on this will depend on our view of the authority of Matthew and the purpose of the gospels. In my understanding Matthew's interpretive comment is every bit as authoritative and binding on the believer as our Lord's teaching, for Matthew could also in one sense say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me."⁵

It is important in this regard to note that the terms "authentic" and "authoritative" deal with two different dimensions of the gospel tradition. The term "authentic" deals with the *historical* question of what Jesus of Nazareth actually said in A.D. 28-30 on this occasion in Capernaum. At times an account in Mark may be closer to the actual words Jesus spoke on this occasion—that is, it may be more "authentic" than the parallel accounts in Matthew or Luke—and at times the reverse may be true. The term "authoritative," however, deals with the *theological* question of canonicity. An "authoritative" saying is one that is canonical—that is, it possesses divine authority in that it is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16). An authoritative saying is, then, a saying found in the canon of Scripture, and for the evangelical this means that it is infallible. A saying in the gospels that is authentic is, of course, authoritative as well, but a "nonauthentic" saying found in the gospels is likewise authoritative since it is canonical and inspired by the Spirit of God. For some evangelicals this may be a difficult concept, but the Scriptures themselves teach that the role of the Spirit was not merely to help the evangelists recall the authentic words of Jesus but also to help them understand the significance of these words by giving to them as well an authoritative interpretation of what Jesus meant.

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare

³For a discussion of these tools see R. H. Stein, "The 'Criteria' for Authenticity," *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980) 225-263.

⁴R. H. Stein, "Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?," *JETS* 22 (1979) 115-121.

⁵*Ibid.*, 119-120.

it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:12-15).

According to these verses the role of the Spirit was not merely to help the disciples recall the words of Jesus. He was to guide them into all truth and teach them many things that they could not "bear" during the ministry of Jesus. For this writer this involves not only the ability to recall the authentic words of Jesus but also the provision of authoritative interpretations of those words. Both the "authentic" words of Jesus and the "nonauthentic" interpretations of those words found in the gospels are therefore authoritative since they are both inspired by the Spirit of truth.

One reason that evangelicals have trouble with the use of these terms is that frequently in the literature "nonauthentic" is a synonym for "nonauthoritative." An example of this is found in the writings of Joachim Jeremias:

The gospel of Jesus and the kerygma of the early church must not be placed on the same footing, but they are related to one another as call and response. The life, acts, and death of Jesus, the authoritative word of him who dared to say *abba*, the one who with divine authority invited sinners to his table, and as the servant of God went to the cross—all of this is the call of God. The early church's witness of faith [the nonauthentic sections of the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament], the Spirit-led chorus of a thousand tongues, is the response to God's call. . . . According to the witness of the New Testament, there is no other revelation of God but the incarnate Word. The preaching of the early church, on the other hand, is the divinely inspired witness to the revelation, but the church's preaching is not itself the revelation.⁶

Jeremias, by elevating the authentic words of Jesus above the words of the evangelists, has clearly created "a canon within the canon." The problems with such a view cannot be dealt with here, but this writer cannot understand how Jesus' infallible teachings can be more infallible than the Spirit-given infallible teachings of the evangelists. Yet many evangelicals may in practice be closer to the view of Jeremias than they realize, for when one stands in church for the reading of the gospels but remains seated for the reading of the epistles, does this not imply the existence of "a canon within the canon"—that is, that the gospels are more worthy than the epistles because they contain the actual words of Jesus?

Finally, the question must be raised as to whether evangelicals should investigate the gospels in order to seek to ascertain the authentic sayings of Jesus. After all, if each of the gospel accounts is authoritative, why bother attempting to ascertain the *ipsissima verba* or *vox* of Jesus? This writer would suggest three reasons why this "quest" is both necessary and profitable. The first is that, like Mt. Everest, "it is there." There are differences in the parallel accounts in the gospels. This cannot be denied. The student of the gospels furthermore cannot but have a natural curiosity as to what the historical Jesus actually said on a particular occasion. Secondly, if we can arrive at the authentic sayings of Jesus and then note how the evangelists give an authoritative interpretation of these words for their own situation-in-life, we shall be better able to understand their signifi-

⁶J. Jeremias, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus* (tr. N. Perrin; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 23. Cf. also J. A. Findlay, *Jesus and His Parables* (London: Epworth, 1950) 123, who states that "if we are convinced that Jesus was 'God manifest in the flesh', and that the evidence that He said such and such things is sufficient to make it probable that they actually passed His lips, we must attach more importance to them than to all the utterances of His truly inspired followers."

cance for us today. If we can in fact arrive at the authentic words of Jesus and at the same time also possess an authoritative interpretation of those words by the evangelists, are we not doubly blessed in that we possess both the inspired words of Jesus and an inspired interpretation of those words as well? How much richer we are, therefore, than if we possessed three identical accounts of the authentic words of Jesus.⁷ Finally, it should be noted that such an investigation can frequently serve an apologetical purpose as well, for if we can demonstrate time and time again that the evangelist's interpretations are in continuity with and flow out of the actual words of the historical Jesus, we shall be able to establish bridges between the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus. The value of this should not be minimized.⁸

¶If all the parallel accounts in the gospels were identical in every respect, outside of some possible apologetical value (multiplicity of witnesses), would this not in effect make all but one of these accounts superfluous?

⁸Cf. the concluding paragraph in Stein, " 'Criteria,' " p. 253: "Finally it should be pointed out that if by the use of these various criteria certain sayings in our Gospels can in fact be demonstrated as being authentic and this in turn can establish a continuity between the historical Jesus and kerygmatic Christ, there is then no *a priori* reason to be skeptical about the general portrait of Jesus found in our Gospels. On the contrary it would then be clear that the burden of proof lies with those who would reject the authenticity of the gospel materials rather than with those who accept their authenticity. We can say this in another way using the terminology of the law court. If by the criteria discussed above the authenticity of certain sayings and motifs in the Gospels can be demonstrated which establish a continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, then we should assume that the other sayings and motifs in the Gospels are 'innocent until proven guilty,' i.e. a saying in the Gospels purporting to come from Jesus is true (authentic) until proven false (unauthentic)."