Story as Truth

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Originally, the Gospels were experienced as sounds produced by storytellers who learned the stories by heart and performed the stories for audiences. This storytelling tradition was initiated by Jesus' own teaching and was continued in the telling of the stories of Jesus' deeds soon after his death and resurrection.

The meaning of the Gospels may have included the assumption that the stories were historically descriptive and that they contained perceptions and beliefs about God. But the primary meaning of the Gospels was centered in the relationship that was established between Jesus as the central character of the stories and the lives of the listeners.

In a variety of ways, those who believed the stories were healed from physical and spiritual sickness. For those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, the stories became central to their own spiritual formation. They learned the stories by heart and began to tell the stories themselves. The function of the documents was to record and to resource this storytelling process.

A central dimension of the work and witness of this storytelling community was to tell the stories as an alternative to the government of Rome and its practice of war and domination as the way of bringing peace. The documents of the four Gospels were all composed in the aftermath of the Jewish war, the most tragic war in the history of ancient Israel.

The telling of the stories of Jesus was a nonviolent witness to the government of Jesus Christ that was announced as a present reality radically different than the government of the Roman Empire, specifically: Vespasian (69-79), who led the initial reconquest of Palestine after the revolt in 66 C.E.; Titus (79-81), who led the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple; his younger brother Domitian (81-96), who was probably the most corrupt and violent emperor of Rome throughout its entire history.

It is significant that the names of these three emperors of Rome, who were in power in the same period as the composition of the Gospels, do not occur in the New Testament. They are simply ignored and do not exist in the world of the New Testament, whereas Jesus is named numerous times and is frequently called *kurios*—"Lord"—a term also used frequently in the Roman world for the Emperor.

Today the role of the Gospels should be to serve as a source for the remembrance and retelling of Jesus' stories: both the stories he told, and the stories that were told about him. The Gospel manuscripts are similar in their function to musical manuscripts and provide guides for performances of the stories.

The meaning of these performances varies widely with the occasion, context, performers, and audiences. The experience of the Gospels is highly engaging, emotionally involving, and memorable. A strong sense of community is generated by the process of learning and telling the stories. Networks of relationship are formed by common experience of them.

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While historical and theological meaning is not excluded from the experience of the stories, this is not the primary or first level of meaning. Rather it is the engagement with Jesus and the sharing of the experiences of his teaching and actions that is the major source of meaning. The telling and hearing of the stories reframes human experience and connects in a wide variety of ways with the experience of persons and communities now.

In telling by heart, the Gospels will re-emerge from the eclipse that they have experienced in Enlightenment culture. Rather than being valued more or less solely for their meaning as reference sources for theology and history, the Gospels are valued first and foremost for their capacity to enable us to experience the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus now.

This experience invites both tellers and listeners into a deep engagement and involvement with the stories. It is much different than the study of the texts for theological or historical information, whether that information is based on a critical methodology or is based on a non-critical methodology that accepts whatever is written as the truth.

What has been eclipsed in the culture of the Enlightenment is the meaning of the stories as stories. To use Hans Frei's metaphor, a shadow has been cast over the light of biblical narrative as narrative. As Frei shows so clearly in his exposition of 18th century biblical interpretation, the underlying reason for this is that the scientific culture of the Enlightenment did not regard stories as sources of significant knowledge.

In the philosophical systems of empiricism and idealism, history and theology were modes of thought that were valued as sources of knowledge. They were not "mere" stories but were "true." Story was associated with myth, fantasy, imagination, emotion, and leisure entertainment. Story and storytelling were associated with oral culture and with children.

Once one became literate and capable, therefore, of reason and objective thought, one put aside childish things and learned to pursue the scientific methods of gaining knowledge. In this sense, biblical narrative was not so much eclipsed as it was recast. Biblical narrative was melted down as story and poured into the moulds of history and theology.

The stories continued to be read and even performed. But the performances became increasingly disembodied and "objective." This style of performance rendered the stories meaningless as stories so that they could be interpreted as sources of theological and historical truth. Stories are, after all, closely associated with fiction and things that are made up. Stories are not "true."

What then is "true?" The quest of the historical Jesus has pursued an objective reevaluation of the documentary sources of the ancient world in order to evaluate the stories of the four canonical gospels as sources of historical information. In general, they have found that the gospels are riddled with the anachronistic reading back into the story of Jesus beliefs and experiences from a later period. The church read back into Jesus' story its own experiences and beliefs and thereby distorted the historical record.

In order to sort historical fact about Jesus from the anachronistic stories of the evangelists, it is necessary to evaluate the data critically. What is historically more probable, that this story reflects the original, historical core of the story or that it reflects the experience and beliefs of the early church?

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In the Jesus seminar, a group of scholars worked through the Gospel tradition and voted on the historical probability of every teaching and story in the Gospels. Overall, they found a relatively small number of the stories and teachings to be "historical." Most of the material in the Gospels was found to be reflective to some degree of the experience and beliefs of the early church. In this sense, it is not "true" but has been distorted by the reading back into the story of later experience.

This in turn has led to a critical disregard for the stories themselves as stories. It makes no sense, for example, to learn the Gospel stories by heart if they are riddled with fiction, myth, and elements that are essentially "false." From this perspective, it is better to reinterpret the gospels by retelling the story as "history." Over the past two hundred years, hundreds of books have been published that purport to tell the historical "truth" about Jesus, and who he really was, and what he really did.

In recent years, a new series of studies have been published by John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, John Meier, Paula Fredrichsen, N.T. Wright, and in a more popular vein, Bishop Spong. These complex studies seek to sort out the "facts" from the 'fiction" of the texts. The alternative against which these authors are struggling is conservative "fundamentalism" that accepts everything in the stories as historically factual and is fraught with even more problems.

Is this historical version "truer" about who and what Jesus was than the "straight stories"? In one sense, yes, the product of the quest has a higher degree of historical probability in the elements that it finds to be "historical." But there is a major problem with all of these studies. In each instance, they gain historical probability by eliminating most of the Gospel tradition as reliable sources.

Crossan, for example, eliminates all of the elements of the Gospels that include elements of 1st century eschatology. This is a major departure from the classic study of the historical Jesus by Albert Schweitzer. Indeed Schweitzer and many of his successors regarded the eschatological elements of the Gospels to be historically reliable. As a result of this decision, Crossan's gospel presents Jesus as a Jewish wisdom teacher, a Jewish cynic philosopher, who brought new life to the wisdom traditions of Israel.

And this in turn is a symptom of the most basic problem: was Jesus the Messiah? The early church's belief that Jesus *was* the Messiah means that all of the elements of the Gospel stories that deal with the issue of Jesus' identity, his suffering, death and resurrection in relation to the messianic traditions are rejected as historically unreliable. Inevitably, therefore, any historical reconstruction like that of Crossan is a massive reduction of our experience of Jesus when compared with the stories of the gospels.

Because the historical version of the Gospel is inevitably reductionistic, all pictures of the historical Jesus are necessarily incomplete. Major dimensions of who Jesus was are inevitably rubbed out of the picture. This, then, seems to be inherently inaccurate and in a significant sense, untrue.

My personal conclusion is that the most historically reliable picture of Jesus is an experience of all four Gospels as story, told by heart. Elements of that picture are anachronistic and we will never know with precision what they are. But I believe a viable alternative to the Jesus seminar approach to the quest of the historical Jesus is to learn and tell all four gospels until each of them has the ring of historical authenticity.

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