

Humanizing the Gospels

For the past several years I have been engaged in a project where I have attempted to link the psychology of memory with history. Although this study has ranged far and wide, I also spend a lot of time studying early Christian history, especially with an eye towards what happened to the memories of Jesus' followers over time. I loosely call this practice humanizing the gospels. Just as the *Iliad* was sung to Greek audiences, just as the *Aeneid* was written for Caesar Augustus and Ovid's *Art of Love* written to tell men of Augustus' day how to seduce married women, so the texts dealing with Jesus, both canonical and non-canonical, are the products of people who wrote particular reasons for particular audiences. This has allowed me to explore classical history in a way I never did before. I used to get frustrated because it seems that our culture only gives us two options when we read these texts: we either have to worship them as divine scripture or we have to reject them by pointing out the obvious discrepancies. A few years ago I captured the futility of this false alternative in a phrase, "No one insults the *Iliad*." By that, I mean people accept the *Iliad* for the powerful epic that it is, wrestle with the ethical issues that it raises, and don't feel the need for it to be true for it to be meaningful.

When one no longer treats these works and their authors as sacred texts written by marble busts, one is able to engage and dispute with the authors. I have found far more benefit wrestling with an author than I have blindly following them. Even with my friends, we won't always agree but hopefully all of us benefit by respectfully engaging each other.

Throughout the Jewish and Christian scriptures, we gain glimpses into the actual writing of the works. The Jewish scriptures, for example, provide nearly two dozen references to earlier works, indicating that whoever was writing the text was consulting, selecting, and summarizing earlier works to construct their texts. For example, we have many references to the acts of kings (e.g., *The Chronicles of the Kings of Israel*, *Chronicles of the Kings of Judah*, *the Acts of Solomon*, *the Annals of King David*). Further, many authors explicitly mention dictating their words to a scribe. Jeremiah, Paul, and Peter, for example, all have explicit references to scribes and sometimes we are even given the scribe's name. From them we learn of Baurch (Jeremiah 36:4), Tertius (Romans 16: 2), and Silvanus (I Peter 5: 12). It was quite common for an author to add a sentence or so at the end to authenticate the letter. Thus, we are not surprised to Peter and John also used scribes to record their versions of Jesus' life. Peter's follow Mark, for example, only wrote down Peter's teachings because people begged him "to leave behind a written record of the teaching given to them orally, and did not quit till they had persuaded the man". From multiple traditions, John dictated his gospel to his disciple Papias of Hierapolis.

As it turns out Papias is linked to a story that touches deeply on how the gospels were written. While referred to by many ancient writers, the story of the woman taken in adultery only occurs in the gospel of John. While it is customarily placed at 7: 53-8:11, this placement is somewhat speculative. Many ancient and diverse manuscripts omit this story, or place it at other places in the gospel (e.g., after 7: 36 or after 21: 25), a few even place it in the gospel of Luke (e.g., after Luke 21.38), and other accounts link a form of the story with a non-canonical gospel, the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*. While it does not appear to be part of John's narrative as he wrote it, there are many traditions that connect this story to John through his disciple Papias. In particular, he is accused to have written the story himself.

I don't think that he did, and have long believed that although the story doesn't pass the usual standards of multiple attestation that it rings true. It appears to be another one of the ongoing dispute Jesus was having with the religious leaders of his day regarding his message. The Christian accounts seem to relish Jesus' ongoing debates with the leaders of his day, and the apostle Paul and other writers chime in on

debates in the early history of Christianity. Some of these debates have very human dimensions, involving marital relationships, friendships, following ethical principles one has established, the relationship of a person to their government, and many others. I should hasten to add that this is true in nearly ethical tradition.

As for the story of the woman taken in adultery it is not one of Jesus' finer moments. It's clear that the scribes and Pharisees were also trying to trap Jesus in a dilemma between keeping the laws of Moses that required that she be stoned and the law of the Romans that did not allow the Jews to execute for such reasons. In many ways, this is another form of the question about taxation and giving to Caesar what is Caesar. In this case, however, Jesus doesn't attack the law of Moses and say that no one should be killed for this, and his answer makes little sense other than to call the Pharisees' bluff. They weren't going to stone her either. In this context, it's worth asking, "what would be a better answer to the Pharisees when faced with a conflict between one's ethical beliefs and one's laws?"

I am not a Christian, nor am I a member of any particular religion or school of thought. I read and wrestle with the great epics for the same reason people have read and wrestled with them for generations. I learn something from mediating on Achilles' anger, I learn something pondering Aeneas' duty, I learn something wrestling with Howard Roark, and I learn something by pondering over the mass of manuscripts and history we have surrounding the historical figure of Jesus and the movement started in his name.

I can relate to people and books written by people, and I find that I enjoy them so much more. I hope my regular musings share some of this enjoyment.

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