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MINISTRY & BIBLICAL CRITICISM

A DISCUSSION WITH REFERENCE TO LUKE'S BIRTH NARRATIVE

BY KELLY CARTER

I am a Bible-believing Christian, one who takes the Scriptures as revelatory and authoritative. I am very interested in knowing the Bible well and in knowing God through the Scriptures. I am also intensely interested in truth. At times I am a bit disturbed by where a search for truth takes me, because knowing the truth can disrupt prejudices, but I also know that truth discovered can bring me nearer to the heart of God.

Seeking truth has caused me to take seriously the efforts by biblical critics to describe as fully as possible the nature of biblical writings. While biblical critics are sometimes excessively radical and at times irresponsible in the application of their methods, much of critical scholarship has significance for those who wish to know the Bible better, and certainly for ministers like me for whom the Scriptures are ultimate authority.

While we may wish that churches of the Stone-Campbell movement could remain untouched by much of what occurs in biblical scholarship, it is inevitable that we will be increasingly affected by it. Several factors are responsible for this potential change: the increase in the number of preachers and teachers among us who hold advanced degrees from universities and seminaries (and are therefore aware of the critical issues), the prevalent publicity of the Jesus Seminar, the access to discussion groups about Christianity and the Bible afforded by the Internet, the theological and practical shift in our churches in recent years, the availability of many Christian publications, and the increase in the number of educated Chris-

tians in our pews. Significant, too, is the steady rise in the number of faithful, believing scholars both inside and outside our churches who accept to a certain extent the results of biblical criticism.¹

As an example, critics are correct when they conclude that the nature of the gospel narratives is not what we might call "raw historical data." For instance, Luke's birth narrative (Luke 1:5–2:52) constitutes history that is interpreted, or what we might call "theologized history." Historical details are woven together in a narrative form that communicates Luke's theology.

In what sense is the narrative then authoritative? How can a believer's approach to the biblical text take into account the results of biblical criticism? Put another way, how do we minister to churches using biblical criticism without sacrificing the Bible's authority, the believer's faith, or the literary character of the texts? Luke's birth narrative provides an example of an appropriate interaction between faith and biblical criticism.

Luke's Birth Story and Biblical Criticism

As we look at the evidence of the birth narrative of chapters 1 and 2, it is clear that some of the results of New Testament criticism are helpful in interpreting Luke's message.² For example, there is an intentional parallelism in the accounts of the annunciations and births of John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 1:5–38; 1:57–2:40). They are placed side by side, but in such a way that Jesus is given superiority. Although this does not rule out the historicity

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of the events recorded, it does reveal that there is literary intention on the part of Luke. The basic historical details have been *purposefully edited and organized*.³ Further, there seems to be a conscious attempt to shape the stories of John and Jesus in accordance with the Old Testament stories of Isaac and Samuel.⁴ In fact, the birth narrative is more Semitic in character than any other portion of Luke's writing, including Acts. Luke most likely used Aramaic sources, which he probably edited as he incorporated them into his gospel.⁵

The vocabulary and style of the birth narrative reveal several instances in which Luke's editorship is fairly certain. We see vocabulary and grammatical conventions typical of Luke when he is using material from Mark.⁶ A reconciliation of the birth narratives in Luke and Matthew is difficult, since the differences between the accounts are abundant.⁷ Mary's Magnificat (1:46–55) is largely a compilation of Old Testament passages; it is unlikely that they were blended together in a spontaneous composition.⁸ Finally, many scholars have noted the poetic and dramatic character of the birth account, recognizing that the entire story reads like an artistic narrative rather than an exacting and sterile reporting of facts. This coincides with the way history was written in Luke's day.⁹

What seems to be the case is that Luke provides us an account of the birth of Jesus that includes both historical facts and the theology he wishes to convey. He does so by editing historical details that have been passed on to him in either oral or written form, *shaping those details in a theologically consistent direction and giving them a narrative form and framework*.

I suspect that, for some, what I have described as Luke's method in writing the birth narratives is challenging. What is crucial is that the account must be read on its own terms, taken by Christians for what it is and for the truth concerning God that it conveys. In other words, Luke 1:5–2:52 must be approached in a manner *appropriate to the literature as God has given it to us*.

It is important to understand that the Bible (including Luke 1:5–2:52) is both the words of human beings and

the Word of God. Scripture incorporates the words of particular individuals written in specific historical situations. It expresses in human terms the divinely given understanding of the several authors of the meaning of God's redemptive action in Israel and in Jesus. And because the Holy Spirit used individuals in specific historical situations who used communication conventions current in their times, literary criticism is essential in the consideration of biblical literature. In other words, the human element in the writing of Scripture was God's desire, and it does no violence to the reality of inspiration.

Accordingly, the biblical writers (in our case, Luke) must be evaluated in light of the literary standards of their day and not according to modern standards of historicity (e.g., on-the-spot–video reporting of incidents) or twentieth-century copyright laws. Thus Luke's claims concerning careful research must be measured against the standards of his day. Clearly, he was historical in what he wrote, but he obviously felt free to cast the events in his own language and style and according to his purpose.¹⁰ Further, a careful examination of all the Gospels demonstrates numerous places where the actions and teachings of Jesus are recorded with different details and wording.¹¹ What the writers did in reworking their written and oral sources tells us a great deal about their writing practices—they freely expanded, interpreted, and paraphrased their materials to bring out the meaning they saw in Jesus' words and deeds.¹²

None of this should surprise us, that is, the manner in which most of the gospel records were apparently collected and assembled into narratives. Even despite the confidence we might have in the ability of the Jews to respect religious material and to pass on tradition with little or no alteration,¹³ the differences in detail in the gospel presentations of the same stories are often explained by differences in the oral and written sources used by the gospel writers. Even the apostles, in telling firsthand experiences, no doubt over the passage of time modified and rounded verbatim reports, so that their own recollections are approximations of the words as they were originally spoken or the events as they originally occurred. That is completely natural in human communication of this kind and should not be perceived as some kind of blight on the trustworthiness of Christianity. To think otherwise about the history of the transmission of gospel materials is to assume that God violated the humanity of the gospel writers and the many persons who, over a number of decades, orally passed on stories about Jesus. The New Testament makes no claim of this kind of divine intervention.

Theologized Narrative, Biblical Authority, and Faith

Assuming that what we have said to this point is true, what then is the relationship between narrative texts, such as Luke's birth narrative, and faith? First, it is vital to faith to acknowledge the historical core of what Luke wrote. For example, Joseph Fitzmyer catalogues twelve elements common to Matthew's and Luke's birth stories.¹⁴ Although these core elements have been edited by Matthew and Luke, they form a historical foundation on which the believer's faith can be confidently grounded. Further, the historical core includes all the elements most significant for maintaining the essence of Jesus' ministry and saving efficacy. In other words, nothing crucial is lost by accepting as fact Luke's having edited and interpreted the historical tradition he received. This is especially true if the process of interpretation is viewed as being in concert with the process by which God superintended and inspired biblical writings, and if the Bible can be viewed as revelatory Scripture—Word of God—even though not “raw history” in every detail.

For some, that last sentence is difficult. How can that which is not historical be revelatory of *truth*? I have been helped at this point by a systematic theologian, Karl Barth—that is, as his work has been filtered through Bernard Ramm's *After Fundamentalism*. In chapters 7, 8, and 9, Ramm discloses Barth's perspectives on the dialectical, human, and divine aspects of Scripture. Barth, fully aware of radical biblical criticism, nonetheless accepts the full inspiration and authority of Scripture in the church, positing what he calls a *diatasis*, or distance, between the Word of God and the actual text of Scripture. Ramm says that “by creating this interval, Barth is able to grant historical and literary criticism of the text its rightful place but at the same time manages not to surrender the theological integrity of Holy Scripture.”¹⁵ It is critical to see that for Barth, nothing about the human side of Scripture “detracts from the fact that the authors of Scripture are objective, reliable witnesses to the Word of God. The languages and culture of the authors may deflect the revelation of God from its original purity, but nevertheless the Word of God is in the text of Scripture.”¹⁶ For Barth, God's inspiration of the text occurs in the text *as it is*, so that exegesis of the text will ultimately find the Word of God in biblical texts that reflect, at one level, a very human element. The Word of God, then, always transcends and works above and beyond the human side of Scripture.

Applied to Luke's birth narrative, Barth's *diatasis* might look something like this: The human element of Luke 1:5–2:52 is never divorced from the text. Neverthe-

God speaks his Word through what the writer has offered his readers, by the Holy Spirit's inspiration, so that it is not so much the author who is inspired as the completed text itself. Through the theologized narrative, God speaks.

less, God speaks his Word through what the writer has offered his readers, by the Holy Spirit's inspiration, so that it is not so much the author who is inspired as the completed text itself. Through the *theologized narrative*, God speaks. Historical details within the birth narrative such as, for example, the fact that an angel spoke to Mary are accented by Luke as he describes what the angel said, with the entire narrative acting as inspired and revelatory witness to the Word of God. Or in the case of the Magnificat, the significance of Jesus is indicated in a compilation of Old Testament texts brought together in poetic form. Through this constructed narrative that consists of eyewitness descriptions, historical traditions orally passed down, edited written materials, and a bit of Luke's creativity, the Holy Spirit uses Luke to reveal significant theological content to the church. Through this narrative, God reveals something of his character and intentions, so that what Luke offers can be identified and used as inspired Scripture, Word of God. In this way, both biblical criticism and the inspired character of Scripture are validated.

Ministry in an Age of Biblical Criticism

If, as I suggest, the results of biblical criticism are in the future going to be better understood and, to some extent, accepted by those in churches of the Stone-Campbell tradition (both full-time ministers and those who are not), those who minister full-time will often carry the responsibility of communicating, mediating, incorporating, and reflecting upon the conclusions that biblical critics reach. Such information will be increasingly known by a larger segment of the church, calling for balance in the way that the information is applied in the faith lives of Christians and the churches with which they worship. How can this happen constructively?

First, it is crucial that great patience and wisdom be exercised by those who lead in the church, who are “criti-

cally aware,” and who are also appreciative of some of the results of biblical criticism. It can be expected that although those in the pews will in the future come to know of critical biblical studies at an accelerated rate, they will not necessarily be quick to accept much of what they hear. Fortunately, we have typically been as committed to rationalism and empiricism as they have been to a fundamentalist view of Scripture. That bodes well for those in ministry who attempt to teach some of the results of biblical criticism; in some cases, the facts are undeniable by those willing to weigh evidence, and weighing evidence has always been one of our specialties.

Further, biblical critics who minister to the church must exemplify a faith and lifestyle that will breed justified trust on the part of those who hear them. They must be *believing* critics, with no room for doubt concerning their acceptance of the historicity of the incarnation of Jesus, of his virgin birth, of his saving efficacy, of his resurrection, or of the supernatural empowerment of his ministry and the church. And it is crucial that the believing side of the critic’s life be shown specifically *in the church*. For four or five decades, there has been an increasing number of critically aware scholars in churches of the Stone-Campbell tradition. Unfortunately, some of the best work of those scholars has been known only to the academic community, with little contact between treatment of critical issues and the life of the church. That is changing in that graduate schools of Bible and religion are seeing their former students, many of whom are critically trained, placed in positions of leadership within the churches. I view such change as very positive. As the second generation of Bible students responsibly ministers, putting the results of their critical studies before the church, the church will be served and its understanding of Scripture will only increase.

Finally, the biblical text will have to be closely examined in the context of church life vis-à-vis the academic community as churches become more critically aware. The best answers to tough, critical questions will have to be sought in Bible classes and small groups, including discussion of the debate about inerrancy. Churches will have to offer suggestions concerning published materials written by believing critics. Elders within the congregations will have to be increasingly aware of the issues about which those in their congregations have questions. In fact, I would say that the challenges posed to the church by our culture, coupled with a church increasingly aware of critical issues, will result not only in a demand for ministers who are trained to tackle critical issues, but in an increase in the number of full-time elders whose concentration is in

the area of teaching the Bible with some critical understanding. Churches that include members who are somewhat aware of critical issues are going to expect the teaching of their leaders to reflect something of a believing/critical perspective. Those ministering and leading must be prepared to serve in this way. Exciting times are before us. May God be glorified in all that we do!

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Notes

¹See Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986). Noll illustrates the changes that have taken place in evangelical biblical scholarship in the last forty years. Chapters 7 and 8 are insightful and stress the part played by Lemoine and Jack Lewis in the advance of scholarship in Churches of Christ (97–98, n. 14). See also Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 623–40.

²For the basic historicity of Luke’s writings, see I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971). See also R. T. France, “The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus,” in *History, Criticism and Faith: Four Exploratory Studies*, ed. Colin Brown (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 101–43.

³See Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 248–51.

⁴See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX)*, AB 28 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 308–9.

⁵See John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, WBC 35A (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1989), 21–22; Brown, 245–47; Fitzmyer, 107–27.

⁶For Luke’s editing of Mark and his stylistic peculiarities, see Fitzmyer, 107–27. Examples in the birth narrative are numerous.

⁷*Ibid.*, 304–8.

⁸See the detailed discussion in Brown, 355–65.

⁹See Nolland, 18, 34.

¹⁰See Fitzmyer, 15–18, 289. For a description of the same phenomenon in Matthew, see Gundry, note 1 above.

¹¹The evidence strongly suggests that Matthew and Luke creatively edited their written sources (I assume the priority of Mark), which strengthens the case that routine authorial editing was a standard method of composition.

¹²The Gospels do not provide precise historical detail in the events of Jesus’ life. Even so, the events reported catch the essence of the history.

¹³B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Uppsala, 1961).

Notes continued on page 135