Historical Method and the Johannine Community

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On February 23, 1987 the Toronto astronomer Ian Shelton discovered what may well be the most important astronomical event of this century, the explosion of a giant star called a supernova in our Milky Way's companion galaxy, the Large Magellanic Cloud. Like the birth of a major religion such an occurrence is quite rare; a major previous supernova dates back to CE 1054, the same year in which the Christian Church officially split into eastern and western parts.

As soon as the news of Supernova 1987A became known astronomers focused their telescopes on it, and not just to see the spectacular supernova for themselves, but to discover evidence of a fast spinning neutron star, a pulsar, which according to a well-established hypothesis, is normally left behind after a supernova explosion. There was, however, a need to be patient for it might take as much as a decade for the debris caused by the supernova to thin out sufficiently for the new pulsar to be noticed on earth. Nonetheless, already on January 18, 1989 a team in Chile recorded a series of regular pulses coming from Supernova 1987A. But calculation indicated that the new pulsar had bizarre properties, unlike any known pulsar, and contrary to what had been predicted. The measurements indicated that the new pulsar was spinning close to a speed at which it would be torn apart, and more than three times as fast as any other known pulsar. Furthermore, its magnetic field appeared to be 1000 times weaker than other young pulsars, and it seemed to have an unexplained companion object the size of the planet Jupiter which, one would have thought, could never have survived the explosion. Unfortunately no one was able to verify the observations for the new pulsar had disappeared again, apparently once more obscured by dense debris.

In the following months complex and ingenious reasons were offered which made the strange properties of the new pulsar appear plausible. All these speculations came to a sudden end in January 1990 when it was discovered to everyone's embarrassment that the pulses had not come from a new pulsar, but were caused by the electric interference of a guide camera mounted on the telescope.

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"The Peculiar Pulsar That Wasn't" offers a dramatic illustration to astronomers as well as biblical scholars of the hazards of the scientific enterprise.[1] Firstly, it shows that our reconstructions of past states of affairs may have been based not on real data but on distortions and interferences created by the sophisticated instruments—our critical methods—through which we observe and analyze distant reality. Secondly, we are forcefully reminded of the fact that whether we are historians of the starry heavens or of the human past, we always run the danger of reconstructing not what was but what we expected to find on the basis of our theories. We are, of course, aware of such occupational hazards, but as a rule we do little or nothing to protect ourselves against them.

The most troublesome lesson, however, to be learned from "The Peculiar Pulsar That Wasn't" is that we have got ourselves in a position in which our wrong observations and theories no longer run a serious risk of being contradicted by reality; they have become immune to being falsified by the evidence. The reason is that as scholars we have become too clever for our own good. We are ready to provide an explanation for any discrepancy between our hypotheses and the evidence. Our speculations about ancient states of affairs always seem to be able to overcome the objection posed by the available data. They are never truly at risk of being corrected or defeated by the facts. We allow so many variables and complexities in our theories that we can account for anything real or imagined. Miraculously our hunches always fit, or rather, we make them fit by explaining away any objections. We are so attached to our historical speculations that we keep them alive, even when they do not fit the data, simply by creating other hypotheses which elegantly explain the discrepancies. But if in fact the basic evidence can no longer restrain and defeat our hypotheses then we have strayed from historical science into fiction, and not even very good fiction at that.

The new pulsar, which we call Christianity, at first went all but unobserved by outsiders. Apparently among the mass of debris which made up the Greco-Roman world it was too insignificant to be noted. From the first 100 years of its existence no monuments or documentary evidence remain. The only evidence we have from this period is made up of about three dozen Christian literary texts extant in copies from later periods. Four of them are gospels about Jesus which focus on a period prior to the founding of the church. Almost half of them are letters by the Apostle Paul and three prominent early second century bishops, Clement of Rome,

Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna, which are addressed to individuals or churches in Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. They contain surprisingly little historical information for they are preoccupied with general exhortations and admonitions.

The remaining texts are anonymous or pseudonymous tracts of a homiletic nature, a book of visions by John of Patmos, and a history which recounts the founding of the Church in Jerusalem and the missionary journeys of Paul, written by the anonymous author of the Gospel of Luke who was not an eyewitness to the events he recorded.

In spite of their obvious limitations these literary Christian texts do provide a general outline of the early history of the Christian pulsar. It is clear that the new sect was born within Judaism and was at first limited to Jews and Jewish proselytes. At an early point it spread from Jerusalem to some of the towns in Judea and along the coast of Palestine, and also to Damascus. A few Jewish Christian Hellenists tried to win Jews in the diaspora, but active opposition by these communities frustrated this effort and necessitated a shift in mission towards the Gentiles. Paul was the prime mover of the Gentile mission and he and a small group of associates were able to establish churches in Antioch, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. This brought to the open a basic difference and potential conflict between the Gentile churches, which had from the start been free from the Mosaic law, and the Jewish Christian churches in Judea, which continued to demand law observance. Apparently by the late first century this problematic had lost its importance and was overshadowed by concerns about false teachers of various kinds.

This is the general picture that emerges and which was taken for granted in New Testament scholarship until a few decades ago. Apart from these generalizations the literary texts provide only a few historical details such as the names of some individuals and places, and a number of anecdotes. One could argue that the extent of our knowledge of the earliest history of the Christian pulsar is remarkable in view of the fact that one expects its inconspicuous beginnings to have been obscured by the debris of time, but most New Testament scholars consider the glass mostly empty and continue trying to derive ever more historical information out of the same small group of literary texts.

Two factors seem to offer an opportunity for deriving new or more accurate historical evidence from the early Christian writings. First of all, it is not necessarily the case that the book of Acts provides a comprehensive

overview of the period ending with Paul's arrival in Rome. The author may have been ignorant of certain developments or chose not to record them. This would mean that the historian need not stay within the general confines of Acts but may feel free, if compelled by the evidence, to go beyond them.

The second factor also seems uncontroversial. The historical relevance of a literary text is not limited to the historical details it reports directly, but extends to the historical circumstances of its composition which it reflects indirectly. This indirect data has the advantage that it is inadvertent and thus free from manipulation by the author. Thus the gospels are not only sources for the historical Jesus, but may also be expected to reflect something of the later Christian situation in which they were written. If we can isolate these historical circumstances which a text reflects we will have new historical evidence which can supplement and even correct the data which the texts provide directly.

These two factors provide a new and promising way to observe the Christian pulsar in its infancy, and indeed New Testament scholarship has spared no effort in pursuing this avenue. But there are some serious obstacles on the way. First of all, the book of Acts cannot be so easily accused of being selective and partial in its presentation of the early Christian mission. Critical scholarship has rightly pointed out the limitations of Acts as a history, nonetheless the author's general outline of the spread of Christianity stands up well to scrutiny for it is supported by the Pauline epistles and by the general picture of the expansion of the church in the second and third centuries.[2] The prologue of the Gospel of Luke indicates that we are dealing with a careful, well-informed and skilful author. Thus the assumption that he was ignorant of, or purposely ignored, successful mission efforts other than Paul's would need compelling proof to be justified. No such proof exists. Therefore, the onus remains entirely on those who claim that the church during its first century was established in areas and in forms other than those directly attested to in our literary sources.

We meet even greater obstacles when we consider the possible historical circumstances which may be reflected in a literary text. One would expect these to be largely limited to the situation of the author at the time of composition. Thus one might be able to speculate on the education and social status of the author on the basis of his or her style and composition skills. It is more hazardous to assess the state of mind of the author at the time of writing. For example, we know that Beethoven and Tchaikovsky

composed some of their most joyful and tranquil music while they were under the greatest mental stress, and Van Gogh's paintings are not the products of creative madness, as is often thought, but of an artist who was fully in control of every stroke.

To assess the possibility of recovering the historical circumstances in which a literary text was written we do well to observe cases for which these circumstances are fully known. A good example is John Milton's *Paradise Lost* which was written during the early years of the Restoration of the monarchy after Cromwell. Milton had been a major player in the English revolution and one might have expected that his precarious political position would have been reflected in his literary creation. However, scholars are hard pressed to see any imprint of Milton's situation even though his historical circumstances are well known from other sources. If our only access to Milton's political situation were *Paradise Lost* we would be at a complete loss. Yet this is precisely the situation we face in the case of the early Christian anonymous and pseudonymous writings. These writings may well reflect something about the historical situation at the time of composition, but we are in no position to recover it. New Testament scholarship has not been able to face up to this disappointing fact.

At best, literary texts betray the idiosyncrasies of the author, i.e., style, taste, interests, beliefs and values. But the idiosyncrasies of individuals are of little interest to historians. They need data which permit generalizations on what was typical and applicable not just to one person but to larger groups and communities. The indirect historical information that literary texts reflect appear to be of the wrong kind. Such information is able to provide only a few faint and idiosyncratic hints of individuals but not something that clearly applies to whole communities.

To overcome this major obstacle New Testament scholarship introduced a startling hypothesis. The assumption was made, and is now common, that early Christian writings are virtually unique among literary texts in that they bear the transparent imprint of the historical situation of a community. They do not so much reflect the interest, concerns and experiences of an individual as that of a larger group of Christians. Thus it is common in New Testament scholarship to refer to the community of Mark, or of Hebrews, or even of "Q" (a hypothetical source used by the authors of the Gospel of Matthew and of Luke). This involves two highly dubious assumptions. Firstly, it is taken for granted that these texts were written for a specific community even though there is nothing in them to

indicate that they were intended for anything other than the general Christian public. Secondly it is assumed that the text was not only written for a specific Christian community, but also that it was this community rather than the author that shaped the beliefs and attitudes reflected in text, and that therefore the text provides the historian ready access to the historical circumstances of the community in question. What has happened here is that a common but controversial assumption in biblical studies about the role of religious communities in the shaping of oral traditions has been extended without justification to the composition and redaction of literary texts.

The problem is that communities do not produce texts, and in the rare cases that they commission or endorse a document it is clearly identified as such. Examples of such documents are the acts and proceedings of councils. There are no obvious instances of literary texts for which we can be certain that they reflect the concerns, beliefs and practices of a larger community rather than of the author. No one assumes that Patristic texts, or those of later periods, reflect communities. Normally religious texts are written to propagate beliefs and practices which the author thinks should be generally embraced but which at the time of writing are not. It is wishful thinking to assume that early Christian authors encoded the historical reality of a community in their writings for the convenience of us latter-day historians.

Today's "community analysis" of early Christian literary text is not unlike the mistake made by astronomers when they speculated about the strange pulses which they thought came from Supernova 1987A. By allowing the improbable characteristics they measured to refer to a pulsar their theorizing lost touch with reality. Similarly, biblical scholars lose touch with reality if they fail to observe the inherent limitations of literary texts for historical research, and attribute characteristics to them which are unprecedented and unproven. For by doing so the text is no longer able to resist the extravagant expectation placed on it by historians of early Christianity. It can no longer resist the esoteric eisegesis practised today under the guise of historical analysis. The text becomes a Rorschach blot of which the interpretation is limited only by the imagination of the interpreter.[3]

Perhaps the most striking example of this use of early Christian literary texts is J. Louis Martyn's reconstruction of the historical situation reflected in the Gospel of John.[4] For Martyn, the text of the Gospel operates on two levels: the life of Jesus on the surface level, and the

situation of the church at the time of authorship which is encoded in the text. The latter, Martyn claims, is like an archaeological tell in that it consists of a number of literary strata that betray the shifting interests, concerns and experiences of a specific community over a certain period of time. The obvious stylistic and conceptual homogeneity of the Gospel is not taken to be proof of single authorship, as a more naive interpreter might think, but rather as proof of the single occupancy of the "tell" by a specific community over an extended period. Martyn claims to be able to distinguish at least three periods—or "glimpses" as he modestly calls them—in the life of the Johannine community.

It more than strains the imagination how and why a community would have encoded its history and beliefs in a text which claims to present the signs Jesus did, and of which the expressed aim is to instill in the readers the belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30-31). Even if we allow such an improbable and unprovable hypothesis, the presumption that the modern historian is able to decode the history of this community without any other access to it is nothing but preposterous. Astronomers have their pulsar that wasn't, but New Testament scholars have numerous early Christian communities whose only claim to historical existence is the scholar's imagination.

How can we protect the early Christian texts from the excessive expectations we have put upon them? The only way is to wield Occam's Razor against unwarranted wild growth. In practice that means allowing the available evidence to restrain our historical speculations. Occam's Razor translated into a number of historical principles to be observed, and their corollary fallacies to be avoided. I shall briefly mention the more important ones.

1. The *interpretatio simplicior potior* principle. In historical reconstruction the simplest explanation of the data should always be preferred. This is clearly violated in the recent study of Christian origins which show a pronounced bias to complexity. The burden of proof rests squarely on those who assume large numbers of Christians in the first century rather than small, or wide geographical distribution rather than more restricted, or great diversity of belief and practice rather than more limited.

2. Only in detective novels are things seldom what they appear to be, but in historical research we must proceed on the principle that the evidence normally means what it appears to indicate. If in some cases the evidence

is deceptive we need to admit that we will seldom be in a position to recover the true state of affairs.

3. The most common fallacies found in biblical historical research are, first of all, what A.D. Nock called the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness." The most obvious example of this is our mistaken preoccupation with finding specific and local historical referents for anonymous and pseudonymous early Christian writings.

4. A second common fallacy is that favourite sleight of hand of the historian, the conspiracy theory, which is so convenient when the facts do not fit our cherished theories.

5. Finally I should mention the fallacy of explaining *obscurium per obscurius*, for example J. Louis Martyn's creation *ex nihilo* of a new form of Jewish Christianity for the sole purpose of accounting for some idiosyncrasies in a literary text, the Gospel of John.

The relevance of these principles and fallacies is not easily denied. Why then are they so often ignored in biblical studies? I believe the reason is that we have great difficulty facing up to the disappointment that the historical conclusions warranted by the evidence are very limited, and probably have already been reached, though at present they may be obscured by unwarranted speculations whose name is Legion and whose potential number is infinite.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Dr. Michael Pettem for drawing my attention to "The Peculiar Pulsar that Wasn't." See Gerrit Verschuur, "The Peculiar Pulsar That Wasn't," *Astronomy* 18 (June 1990): 10-12; and "Do Astronomers Believe in Things That Don't Exist," *Astronomy* 18 (August 1990): 16-19.

2. See A. Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1908), and Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), pp. 265-335.

3. Umberto Eco takes aim at this in his brilliant novel *Foucault's Pendulum* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990).