

PAUL BARNETT AND THE LOGIC OF HISTORY: SOME PROBLEMS WITH HIS APPROACH TO THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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Is there a methodology or historiography that will allow us to have a distinctively scientific approach to the (third) quest for the historical Jesus?¹ The evangelical Anglican *Neutestamentaler* and former Bishop of North Sydney, Paul W. Barnett, answers this question in the affirmative. He argues that the New Testament letters are “more valuable” than the Gospels and Acts for information about the historical Jesus.² At the heart of Barnett’s methodology there is a logical syllogism at work.³ The major premise is that the letters contain information about the historical Jesus. From this reasoning two minor premises follow: 1) the letters are not intentional history and are occasional in that they “are innocent of any attempt to convey new information about the historical Jesus,”⁴ and 2) the letters are written only to “those who are already persuaded to be Christians.”⁵ The conclusion of these assumptions is that the letters are more historiographically neutral and therefore are “more valuable” than the Gospels and Acts for information about the historical Jesus.⁶ It is these premises that we will address in this study. This article will attempt to establish that because both of the minor premises are false, the argument is invalid. Barnett’s priority of the epistles above the Gospels and Acts extends beyond this particular syllogism but these propositions remains a critical component that has been overlooked in book reviews and recent scholarship.

The Promise of Scientific Historiography

The promise of science for the study of Jesus in the New Testament and the use of the scientific method in historiography are major backdrops to Barnett’s work on the issue of the historical Jesus. The source of Barnett’s approach is the Tudor historian G. R. Elton who defines “history” in a rather benign way: “[history] deals with events, not states; it

¹ The “third quest” appeared in N. T. Wright’s update of S. Neill’s *The Interpretation of the New Testament*. For an orientation to this nebulous term see James P. Sweeney, “The Death of Jesus in Contemporary Life-of-Jesus Research, *TrinJ* 24:2 (2003): 223-225. For a critical consideration of even using the “third quest” taxonomy see Stanley E. Porter, “Reading the Gospels and the Quest for the Historical Jesus” in *Reading the Gospels Today*, Stanley E. Porter, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 35-36. For comments about the “historical Jesus” versus the “real Jesus” see Scot McKnight, “Jesus of Nazareth” in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 150. Here I follow McKnight and assume parity between the “historical Jesus” and the real figure.

² Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*, (New Studies in Biblical Theology series 3; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 25.

³ This method characterizes a majority of his three volume history of early Christianity entitled “After Jesus”: *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years* (A.D. 33-55), *Paul: Missionary of Jesus* (A.D. 34-64) and *Finding the Historical Christ* (A.D. 60-80). For an explanation see the preface of Paul Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI /Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), vii.

⁴ Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*, 25; Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), 15.

⁵ Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*, 40.

⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

investigates things that happen and not things that are.”⁷ What is more controversial is Elton’s radical epistemology that denies a correspondence view of reality: “no connection exists between the initial event and the record of it.”⁸ Barnett encountered this method in 1968 in a seminar with Elton for the BA Honours Program in History at the University of Sydney.⁹ Elton’s work was influential in shaping general historiography and his work *The Practice of History* (Sydney 1967) is described as shaping “a whole generation of Cambridge modern historians.”¹⁰ Barnett appropriated this method and has continued to apply it to the field of New Testament history.

It is apparent from E. A. Judge’s description of Elton’s method why it was appealing to Barnett. Judge describes the method thus: “The objective truth of past actions can be reconstructed through empirical study of the documents left by people, who had chosen to act as they did. Cast aside were social theory, abstract causes and ideology, the image in the eye of the beholder.”¹¹ This methodology offers the promise of objectivity and a truly scientific criterion that could be applied to the New Testament history. Subjectivity could be eliminated by a rigorous attention to the text. The appeal of this line of thinking would be obvious to Barnett. By managing the subjectivity and approaching the New Testament scientifically, he would be able to produce a New Testament history that can stand up to the rigors of the wider community of historians. This has the potential to move study of the historical Jesus (and the New Testament) out of the ghetto of dogmatics and into the respected realm of scientific historicism.

Objectivity and the Problem of Circularity

It will be helpful to develop how Barnett understands historiography and objectivity. Barnett’s methodology is significant because he totally reverses the common approach to New Testament historiography. Whereas many studies begin with the Gospels and Acts and then move outward from them toward the letters, he employs the opposite.¹² Barnett’s approach turns on the hinge of authorial intention. If the biblical writers are understood to have intentionally written history, then the material is biased and less valuable. But if the biblical writers are understood to have written history only incidentally, then the material is more valuable.

Barnett has argued vociferously that ancient historiography and modern historiography differ in substance. The former is subjective and the latter objective.¹³ But a close examination of this argument reveals that it is based largely on appearances and the ability to *conceal* biases, not remove biases. He states, “[the] major difference between modernity and

⁷ Elton as quoted by Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*, 18-19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹ E. A. Judge, “Paul Barnett and New Testament History,” in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, Vol. 9; ed. S. R. Llewelyn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2002), ix.

¹⁰ Judge, “Paul Barnett and New Testament History,” x.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, x.

¹² For example, Barnett’s approach turns Porter’s conclusion on its head: “[R]egarding the quest for the historical Jesus... the Gospels as transmitted to us will continue to be central to the discussion, and knowledge and appreciation of them must remain paramount, for without them we cut ourselves off from any direct link to the foundations of the investigation.” Porter, “Reading the Gospels and the Quest for the Historical Jesus,” 55.

¹³ Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity*, 12.

antiquity is the *identifiable* motivation of the authors.”¹⁴ Biases are actually present in both modern and ancient history or the difference lies in how much one identifies one’s motivations. Here it would be helpful for Barnett to interact with epistemological models. In sum, it is entirely justifiable to apply Barnett’s model to his own history. Therefore, to discount Luke’s history amounts to an admission that all intentional history is to be discounted or at least worthy of suspicion. The method becomes circular and vicious.¹⁵

Barnett’s approach to dealing with biases has changed significantly between his earlier and later scholarship. By arguing in more recent (and more important) works that the Gospels and Acts are too subjective to be first-tier historical documents about the historical Jesus, he has departed from his former position as articulated in *Is the New Testament Reliable?* (1986). In this book, which appeared early in Barnett’s writings, he cites Mark, John and Acts as examples of historical documents that provided evidence that “Jesus really lived.”¹⁶ His citations of the Gospels and Acts are used to prove his thesis that “the holding of personal convictions doesn’t necessarily mean blindness or dishonesty.”¹⁷ More importantly, Barnett argues, “Admiration may be the motive in writing, but it does not of itself destroy objectivity; this depends on the integrity of the writer.”¹⁸ The very use of eyewitness testimony in the Gospels is contrary to Barnett’s contention that “In antiquity writers understood that objectivity was a desirable goal, but they seldom knew how to achieve it.”¹⁹

If we were to summarize the Gospels as evidencing admiration and worship of Jesus, under this earlier method we would still be able to state that they had both objectivity and an obvious bias. Barnett’s former method provides ample reason to reject his more recent approach because this earlier method is based on the biblical witness. This earlier method stated, “In fact, the presence in the New Testament of details which we find awkward, points to realism and honesty in the apostolic writers.”²⁰ It is not too much of a leap to find the concept of objectivity in or around the terms “realism” and “honesty.” It is the texts of the Gospels and Acts that provide evidence of their own objectivity as historical documents about Jesus that are worthy of equal consideration with the Pauline letters.

What Barnett’s method lacks is the realization of its own subjectivity.²¹ In some sense it is unaware of its own existence. Consider the first minor premise as articulated by Barnett: the letters are “innocent” or more neutral because they are not intentional history. But for Barnett’s method to be truly scientific it must stand the test of being applied to itself. But when this scientific method is applied to itself, Barnett’s history becomes stained with the

¹⁴ Ibid, 12.

¹⁵ Paradoxical criterion in historical Jesus studies is not unique to Barnett. McKnight argues that N. T. Wright has successfully reconciled the criterion of similarity and dissimilarity to form one criterion. See McKnight, “Jesus of Nazareth,” 161.

¹⁶ Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?: A Look at the Historical Evidence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986), 33.

¹⁷ Ibid, 33.

¹⁸ Ibid, 33.

¹⁹ Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*, 6.

²⁰ Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 34.

²¹ This is in spite of Barnett’s own consideration of his own subjectivity. His comments on his own subjectivity do not address how his method might circuitously undermine his own history. See Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*, 7.

fact that it is an intentional history – even as Luke’s history was intentional. The method can only produce a history as innocent as Luke’s history.

Eyewitnesses and the Problem of Anachronism

Barnett’s approach is an attempt to grapple with the implications of the biases of authors, but the end product is destructive to the reliability of eyewitnesses. Barnett notes that the “interests, competence, and integrity of the authors of the sources need to be assessed” as part of the “fundamental” task of the historian.²² According to Elton and Barnett, we must begin with skepticism when reading the Gospels and Acts; because they claim to be accurate historical accounts (compare Luke 1:1-2) we must deny that this is actually historically valuable at the outset. This hermeneutic of skepticism does more than assess the integrity of the author, it begins by assuming eyewitness testimony is so biased that it lacks correspondence between the event that happen and the event as recorded. When it comes to history, the author is guilty until proven innocent.²³

Barnett explains his view on the priority of the letters in terms of the discontinuity between the historical techniques of antiquity and the historical techniques used by historians today. Biblical authors such as Luke were “unsuccessful in disguising their ‘interests.’” This leaves history from antiquity “recoverable but incomplete due the limited extent and frequently tendentious nature of the sources.”²⁴ One may question whether Barnett’s discussion of Augustus’s *Res Gestae* and Claudius’s *Letter to the Alexandrians* is actually communicating that the Gospels and Acts are “limited” in nature. Barnett’s work does make an association between these documents and the New Testament. He states, “We cannot fail to note the parallels in the prologue of Luke’s Gospel, where the author disclaims the status of the eyewitness but nonetheless assures the reader of the pristine qualification of his sources, who were ‘eyewitnesses and ministers’ of the word no less. Nonetheless, despite their well-meant assurances, the authors of antiquity were different in that they did not disguise or were unsuccessful in disguising their ‘interests.’”²⁵

Barnett is clearly aware that his method directly impacts the value of eyewitness testimony in the Gospel of Luke (at least). It is his contention that the Gospels and Acts remain a less valuable source of information about the historical Jesus because they use eyewitness testimony that acknowledges its own persuasive intentions. The eyewitnesses may have given true information, but they are not useful historically.

Elton’s work is appropriated by Barnett so as to create a polarity between the Gospels and Acts versus the letters. There is a “subtle distinction” between “sources that were intentionally written narrative, on one hand, and those from which information is gleaned incidentally, on the other.”²⁶ Barnett clearly articulates that “The Gospels and the book of Acts belong to the first category. The letters of the New Testament, which are often

²² Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*, 22.

²³ The apostle Paul viewed eyewitness testimony as valuable objective data that he included in his summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15.

²⁴ Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity*, 13.

²⁵ Ibid, 12-13.

²⁶ Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 15.

concerned with the occasional, that is, with the ordinary events of life, are of special interest to the historian.”²⁷

This position, as articulated in Barnett’s more recent work, is also a departure from his position taken in *Is the New Testament Reliable?*. In an early volume he argues that “[e]very part of the New Testament is, as far as I can see, a response to real life needs. It is a collection of ‘occasional’ literature, each part written for some specific occasion or purpose.”²⁸ This is specifically inclusive of the gospels. One example that precedes this explanation is, “Mark was written to set down information about Jesus in a more permanent form and also to bring the good news about Jesus to a particular group of readers, probably Greek-speaking Romans.”²⁹ Barnett’s older position still presents a challenge. Even if the notion of gospel-specific communities (e.g. a Johannine community) is rejected, the Gospels still retain an occasional nature while being intentional history. Barnett’s acknowledges this when he comments, “one Gospel and one or more letters are associated with each of the four mission leaders.”³⁰ The diversity amid the Gospels present a special problem for Barnett’s proposal since they demonstrate that while they are intentional history they retain an occasional quality that should result in making them equally important to the historian as Paul’s occasional letters.

The irony is that Barnett’s historiography establishes a hermeneutic that gives due attention to eyewitness testimony only long enough to locate a text in a polarized grid. A critique of this view need not move to the other extreme of denying the importance of classifying ancient documents according to the intention of the author. Should we begin the search for the historical Jesus with the act of using statements designed to bolster claims of integrity and correspondence as evidence of the contrary?

This approach is highly anachronistic because eyewitness testimony is valued only when given in objective and persuasion-less reportage. The very value of eyewitness testimony is that there is a witness to claim that his or her account is first-hand information. To disguise the nature of first-hand information would be to erase all ability to communicate the quality and source of the information. But this is precisely what historians such as Luke did. It is this very act of eyewitness-based communication that make the sources intentional history and therefore tendentious.

Innocence and the Problem of Rhetoric

The second minor premise in Barnett’s syllogism (as outlined in the introductory paragraph of our study) is that the letters are written to “those who are already persuaded to be Christians.”³¹ The conclusion of the syllogism is that the letters are more historiographically neutral and therefore are “more valuable” than the Gospels and Acts for information about the historical Jesus.³² Subjectivity is understood in terms of how rhetorical or persuasive a text is and objectivity is understood in terms of how little it attempts to persuade. Barnett explains, “By subjectivity I mean the writer’s discernible tendency to

²⁷ Ibid, 15.

²⁸ Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 34.

²⁹ Ibid, 34.

³⁰ Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*, 16.

³¹ Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*, 40.

³² Ibid, 25.

report and interpret events according to his values and prejudices with the intent that the reader (i.e. hearer) adopt the writer's values and prejudices in the interpretation of the events."³³ Paul's letters are assumed to have more historical value because the Gospel "authors have a strong loyalty to their subject, Jesus, and they write intentionally to confirm their readers in or win their readers to the same loyalty."³⁴

Thus, a large piece of Barnett's approach rests on the proposition that Paul's letters are *less* rhetorically oriented than the Gospels and Acts. Whereas the Gospels evidence authorial intention to persuade the reader to convert oneself to Jesus, Paul's letters are less biased because they assume the implied reader is a Christian. Barnett describes the rhetoric of the Gospels thus, "Biographies supplies comprehensive information to inform the mind of the reader; gospels inform the mind about Jesus in order to challenge the reader's will and behaviour."³⁵ This second minor premise in Barnett's syllogistic historiography is plagued by the problem that Paul's letters evidence a high degree of rhetoric and that the Gospels (and Acts) also addressed those who were already Christians. This approach is somewhat counter-intuitive in light of the trajectory of New Testament scholarship that assumes that Paul is a rhetorician and that the Gospel writers were not.

Are the Gospels and Acts more rhetorical than Paul's letters? Although Barnett answers in the affirmative, this is problematic. Barnett's approach does not seem to take into account the fact that the Gospels also addressed those who were Christians. In his earlier work *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, Barnett stated, "John calls his work 'a book' written so that the reader may 'believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' (John 20:30, 31). This suggests that John may be writing for those who already have some knowledge of Jesus to ensure that what they believe about him is correct."³⁶

If John were written with the intention to correct information about Jesus, it does not follow that it is so rhetorically oriented that it should be considered of secondary value as a primary source when compared to the letters. This same issue applies to Mark in which there are "clues" to a dualistic authorial intention to address unbelievers and "give instruction and encouragement to believers (Mark 13:37)."³⁷

Barnett provides fourteen points of information that Paul provides about the historical Jesus and explains that "the details are conveyed incidentally and innocently."³⁸ It is not contested as to whether Paul exaggerates any details about the historical Jesus. What is contested is the incidental and innocent nature of Paul's historical references such as Jesus "was a Son of David (Romans 1:3)" or Jesus "was born and lived under the Jewish Law

³³ Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*, 5.

³⁴ Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*, 5. For a similar position on rhetoric in the Gospels as "tendentious" see Ben Witherington III, *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 78. It is not clear if Barnett follows Witherington in differentiating Paul's rhetoric as simple persuasion as opposed to the sophistry of formal Greco-Roman rhetoric that Paul himself opposed in the Corinthian church. See Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), 166 n14.

³⁵ Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 54.

³⁶ Ibid, 53, also 60.

³⁷ Ibid, 54.

³⁸ Ibid, 131.

(Galatians 4:4).³⁹ Is the historical detail about Jesus being descended from Abraham in Gal 3:16 an innocent and incidental fact? If we understand innocence to refer to rhetorical or persuasive force this is not the case. Galatians uses argumentation that Witherington describes as “deliberative rhetoric,” and the reference to Abraham is integral to Paul’s argument in Galatians that works of the Mosaic covenant as human effort have failed and will fail.⁴⁰

Establishing that Paul was addressing those who had come to some type of belief in the historical Jesus does not establish that his writings are less persuasive or less rhetorical. On the contrary, it may mean that Paul’s rhetoric is of a different nature or is simply constructed differently because he had different aims. Furthermore, by establishing the letters as “more valuable” for information about the historical Jesus, Barnett takes us one more step away from the eyewitnesses as primary sources. Barnett himself notes that “So as far as we can see, Paul himself had neither seen nor heard Jesus of Nazareth.”⁴¹ Paul learned about Jesus from his encounter with him on the road to Damascus as well as through visits to the church in Jerusalem. Paul’s history may be less biased in the sense that it is not designed to be an eyewitness-based account of Jesus, but it is also removed from Jesus’ pre-resurrection life and work.

As Barnett appropriates Elton’s method he loses the ability to fully consider the role of ideology and rhetoric in the New Testament documents. The Gospels are tendentious or rhetorically biased, but so are Paul’s letters. According to Barnett, the letters are innocent and of a higher “quality” for the historian because they use information that is occasional or incidental.⁴² Such claims fail to recognize the role that rhetoric or persuasion played in the both the letters and the Gospels (and Acts).

Conclusion

The first conclusion to draw is that Barnett’s views have changed significantly but his more recent works evidence continuity in his historiography and are more influential. Second, while our criticisms of Barnett’s methodology and historiography are pointed, much of his material is helpful and biblically sound.

The main focus of this analysis has been the proposition that the New Testament letters provide a “more valuable” source of information about the historical Jesus than the Gospels and Acts.⁴³ This elevation of the letters is plagued by three problems. First, when we reject his claim to a radical discontinuity between modern objective historiography and ancient reportage in texts such as Luke-Acts and modern texts, it can be demonstrated that his method undermines itself. Second, whereas Barnett claims that the letters are more objective and valuable because they are occasional we have argued that the Gospels have occasional qualities. Third, where Barnett claims that the letters are more “innocent,” we have argued

³⁹ Ibid, 131.

⁴⁰ Witherington, *New Testament Rhetoric*, 126. The literature on Galatians and rhetoric is vast; for an example of integration of Abraham into a rhetorical outline in Galatians see, Robert G. Hall, “Historical Inference and Rhetorical Effect: Another Look at Galatians 1and 2” in *Persuasive Artistry*, Duane F. Watson, ed. (JSNTSS 50; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 317.

⁴¹ Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 128.

⁴² Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 14-15.

⁴³ This is most clearly articulated by Barnett in his volume *Jesus and the Logic of History*.

that they are just as rhetorical and subjective as the Gospels and Acts. In addition, Barnett's approach to New Testament historiography is detrimental to the Gospel's own use of eyewitnesses.

Perhaps it would be helpful to speak of a quest for a scientific historicism that can be applied to the study of Jesus and the New Testament that is acceptable to both Christians and unbelievers alike. Barnett's quest for the historical Jesus has long wrestled with this difficult apologetic issue. By positioning his historiography as scientific he was able to claim that he could establish the historical facts or historical probability of Jesus with the following caveat: "You will not be expected to accept anything in this book [*Is the New Testament Reliable?*] 'by faith.'"⁴⁴ Much of the data used to develop our criticisms of Barnett's more recent approach have come from his own earlier writings.

Methodologically, his approach to elevating the letters above the Gospels and Acts is less than satisfying because it is preoccupied with establishing a scientific historicism on the basis of supposedly neutral criteria. Our conclusion supports Stanley Porter's criticism of the use of criteria in historical Jesus research that is known for its "failure to develop its own set of criteria."⁴⁵ Barnett's method for approaching the historical Jesus tries to become void of religious subjectivity (e.g. faith) but in doing so it borders on becoming antagonistic to faith; undermining biblical standards of objectivity such as eyewitness reportage. The connection between faith and history may be stronger than Barnett supposes. Contra Barnett, faith plays a key role in historiography. In support of this viewpoint, McKnight states, "historical judgment exercises itself with a framework of faith and presupposition, and those *a priori* have a significant impact on what counts as knowledge."⁴⁶ To those seeking the historical Jesus, you will be expected to accept some things by faith.

⁴⁴ Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 12.

⁴⁵ Porter, "Reading the Gospels and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," 53.

⁴⁶ McKnight, "Jesus of Nazareth," 161.