Interactive Review:

The Historical Reliability of the Gospels

By Craig Blomberg

Review by Brian Sandifer

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Summary

With the turn of each page, I found myself asking “where was this book when I was in college?” I’ve read many books searching for answers since discovering the world of Christian apologetics during my freshman year, but none has answered so many of my nagging questions as Craig Blomberg’s The Historical Reliability of the Gospels (hereafter HRG). Dr. Blomberg has done the evangelical community a great service by sifting through the scholarly six volume Gospel Perspectives series and condensing the spirit of its research into a single work. With the rise of higher critical methods in the last few hundred years, the gospels have come under such fierce attack that many Christians who are exposed to such ideas find themselves doubting or even losing their faith. Blomberg plays both guide and teacher on a seven-phase tour, first introducing the relevant issues of gospel harmony and dissonance, then showing the reader a brief survey of the history of gospel higher criticism. Then he tackles the problems in the gospel texts, discussing miracles, apparent contradictions in the Synoptics, and difficulties the gospel of John. The tour then considers the extra-gospel Jesus traditions and concludes by touching on the historical method of gospel study. The Christian leaves the tour with many of his questions answered and his faith in the gospel texts restored, while others realize (perhaps for the first time) that there is such a thing as conservative, evangelical scholarship and that believing the gospel witness does not require blind faith.

HRG begins by evaluating the traditional approaches to demonstrating the reliability of the gospels. Gospel harmonization dominated church history through the seventeenth century, being the primary method of addressing the similar but non-identical testimonies in the gospel accounts. Harmonization as a method was primarily used in a literal fashion, although a
figurative model also had important adherents. Beginning at the Enlightenment, liberal scholars came to the forefront of biblical study and concentrated on discovering the “historical” life of Jesus lurking behind the gospel accounts. Their conclusions differed widely, but they generally shared a naturalistic and rationalistic worldview. Another goal during this era was the search for synoptic gospel origins (known as source criticism). The critics sought to go beyond the question of whether any gospel borrows from another, and instead proposed complex theories of hypothetical sources to explain the origin of material either unique or common among the gospels. Blomberg suggests there is most likely some truth in the various gospel source theories, but emphasizes caution when referring to documents that existed only in theory.

But higher criticism did not become largely antagonistic toward the historicity of the gospel accounts until the dawn of the new critical methods. HRG succinctly touches the four methodological bases of (1) Form criticism, (2) Redaction criticism, (3) gospels as Jewish midrash, and (4) recent interpretive approaches. Blomberg demonstrates that scholars who utilize these methods unnecessarily bring hostile presuppositions to their studies, while at the same time he proposes more conservative explanations for various problems. For example, radical form critics do not allow the “historical” Jesus to be the true subject of the gospel record because they assume the time gap between the events and the written gospels was great enough to allow for the development of legends. Thus they theorize that the gospels are merely collections of unhistorical short stories and sayings, originating in the early church and arranged by the “editor/evangelist”. Blomberg exposes these assumptions as unwarranted in light of recent discoveries regarding ancient Jewish rabbis and their extraordinary ability to memorize and orally transmit large amounts of information. This section concludes with a case study of
Matthew 21:33-46 and its parallels by showing how each of the higher critical methods, if used in an honest way, can actually yield profitable insights in our understanding of scripture.

Section three addresses the formidable objection to the miracle stories by exploring the problems of credibility and identification. Such questions as “Has science proven miracles do not exist?” and “Why believe in miracles since they do not happen today?” are probed. Blomberg also contrasts the striking differences between the gospel miracle accounts (nature miracles, reanimations, and the resurrection of Jesus) against those found in extra-biblical historical literature.

The heart and soul of HRG deals with the apparent contradictions among the Synoptics. Much has been written of the similarities and differences in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, casting doubt by accusing the authors of conflicting theology, mistakes in historical chronology, omitting details of sources, creating composite speeches until false pretenses, and incorrectly recording many names and numbers. HRG dissects each of these accusations and finds the charges mostly baseless. By understanding the intent of the individual author and the literary conventions of the unique gospel genre, Blomberg argues that all the significant Synoptic contradictions disappear. Scholars would have far less to criticize in the gospels if they granted the same liberty and license readily given to other ancient historians.

The gospel of John, when compared with the Synoptic accounts, presents problems both unique and similar. HRG contends with similar problems of alleged contradictions in gospel chronology, theological conflicts, omission of details, and historical errors. Blomberg’s approach to these shared issues is much the same as his approach in the Synoptics. But since John is so different than the Synoptics, HRG must also treat the unique problems of John’s distinct
accounts, which include questions of authorship, date, and literary style. Twentieth century scholars generally regard John’s gospel as the latest written, the most theological, and therefore the most historically unreliable. Blomberg thinks these contentions irresponsibly paint a caricature that distorts an accurate view of John. One example is John’s highly developed Christology as Son of God. Many suggest this is evidence of the later church making Jesus into someone he never claimed to be in the Synoptics. But this suggestion fails to realize the significance of John’s stress of Jesus’ humanity (“the Word became flesh and lived among us”) and his submission in everything to the Father’s commands (“the Father is greater than I”). These data seem to go against the grain of a high Christology. It should be recognized that John’s Jesus has more depth than the one dimension the scholars perceive.

The final section of this historical tour surveys the Jesus traditions outside the gospels. Relevant early church sources, Graeco-Roman and Jewish historical documents, and references to Jesus in the rest of the New Testament are all covered. In many instances the evidence corroborates the gospel witness. When questions of historical discrepancies in the gospels arise, Blomberg addresses them with honesty and recommends possible solutions. In the example of the death of Judas, the sole historical records we have are in Matthew and Acts, which seem to contradict each other on several details, including the method of his suicide. HRG harmonizes the two accounts in the traditional manner of using Matthew as the background for understanding the Lukan account. When the problems are viewed in this framework, they can be explained to a surprising degree of satisfaction. Other problems raised by Jesus traditions outside the gospels are discussed but not solved. Blomberg is careful to note that there continue to be unsolved mysteries, but they do not outweigh the enormous evidence for the overall historicity of the gospels.
With the tour coming to a close, HRG paused to answer final questions and reflect on the situation in which critics find themselves. Some scholars doubt the gospel genre was meant to record history accurately. Recently they have proposed seven genres in an attempt to characterize the gospels: apocalypse, aretalogy (embellished accounts of a “divine man”), Greek tragedy or comedy, Jewish midrash, Old Testament narratives, parable, and biography. Though the gospels share similarities with many of these genres, the comparisons inevitable break down. HRG concludes the gospels are a unique literary genre, and we must observe its own literary conventions to better understand their historicity in general and their purpose in particular. Finally, HRG shifts to the offensive and places the burden of proof regarding the gospels’ historical reliability squarely on the shoulders of the critics. Having labored to convincingly defend the gospels from the attacks of its enemies, Blomberg challenges the higher critics and hostile historians to consistently apply their tests for historicity to the gospels. He notes that an important historian’s rule is “unless there is good reason for believing otherwise one will assume that a given detail in the work of a particular historian is factual” (page 240).

As an attentive tour participant, I imagine myself along with others applauding our guide for this thorough introduction to the issues pertaining to the debate over the historical reliability of the gospels.
Imagine yourself a juror assigned to the trial of the historical reliability of the gospels. This is the position the reader finds himself in as he hears the case presented by Blomberg in this positive argument for gospel historicity. HRG does not give us the verdict of this trial. It leaves that up to the reader. But Blomberg, as the “defense attorney”, is confident that he has built a case that will convince all but the most hostile observer.

The strengths of HRG are many but of the same flavor. The gospels are our primary source of information about the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Because there is so little historical record of Jesus in other sources, the gospels have been the focus of study. Critics (those both hostile to the gospels and those not so) who view Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as less than the word of God have dominated the scholarly landscape for the last two hundred years. It is the weighty and popular accusations derived from this breadth of critical work that HRG seeks to answer, albeit in an introductory fashion. Concentrating on the gospel accounts under scrutiny, Blomberg offers a conservative and faithful interpretation of the texts as an alternative to the critical assertions. Each problem in the gospels is categorized by type and then systematically addressed. A brief example from the gospel texts is provided for most issues, and when an interpretative method calls for more extensive treatment, HRG offers helpful case studies. This systematic method allows the reader to comprehend each problem and solution individually, thus allowing the book to be a reference for different types of gospel problems. However, the problems flow naturally from each category, rewarding the reader who has been aboard since the tour’s beginning.
Blomberg professes to be a believing, conservative, evangelical Christian, and his scholarship certainly testifies to this profession. This leaves him open to the charge of being a biased witness, and his forthrightness about his background, emotionally vested interest, and assumptions may cause some to immediately plug their ears to his words. But his words are the issue at hand, not his belief in the truth of his arguments. The unbiased and teachable person will recognize this fact. Overall he avoids mixing feelings or dogmatic assertions with his argument. But sometimes he makes unjustified assertions or weakly reasoned conclusions. At one point Blomberg contrasts the differences between exorcism accounts outside the Bible and those found in the gospels. He errs in arguing too much when he asserts that Jesus “does not altered the tone of his voice” while performing exorcisms, but rather suggesting he remains calm and unsensational (page 89). I can’t imagine Jesus purposefully changing the character of his voice (to sound to others like someone different than himself) as a recipe for performing exorcisms, but this is just my subjective image of Jesus. But to suggest that Jesus did not change the tone (defined as quality, volume, duration, or pitch) of his voice – the text absolutely does not warrant such a conclusion, and it is unnecessary to establish Blomberg’s point. In another instance HRG attempts to explain the chronological difference of the temple cleansing accounts between the Synoptics and John (page 172). Blomberg suggests that it is possible that Jesus cleansed the temple twice – once at the beginning of his ministry (John) and once more during his final days (Synoptics). Jesus “could probably have done the deed once with impunity, since it was an overtly Messianic act which at least some of the Jews would have approved.” But this seems far-fetched knowing that the Jewish leaders immediately questioned his authority to do such a thing by asking for a sign. Jesus only answered them with the cryptic saying “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”. The Jews did not understand nor accept his authoritarian
reference to this “sign”, and they probably were not willing to let the event go without injurious consequences for Jesus (John 2:13-22). Most likely, as in other instances, they held back for fear of the multitude. But their restraint was probably not in a spirit of impunity.

Glaringly absent is an answer to the critic’s primary charge against the gospels specifically and the Bible in general. Almost no one disputes that the gospels are historically reliable at instances where they testify to facts that are verifiable by outside sources. The real issue is whether the gospels’ fantastic and supernatural reports are historically accurate. Christians object when critics apply ultra-stringent tests for truth against such reports, arguing that no other historical document is subjected to these same biased tests. But the vast majority of Christian scholars do not admit that the Bible and also the gospels themselves seem to invite such strict tests for truth. The honest critic without malicious intent is merely applying appropriate truth tests to historical documents that internally claim they are truth with a capital “T”. Other historical documents that do not claim divine inspiration or infallibility do not invite such criticism and need not succumb to tests they never claim the ability to pass. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus comes to a theological conclusion from an argument that hangs on the tense of the verb “to be” (Matt 22:23-33). Elsewhere the Jews argue that no man can claim the title “Son of God” without committing blasphemy. But Jesus shows them that God calls them “gods” in the law, so the Jews cannot consistently accuse Jesus of blasphemy by his calling himself God’s son because “the scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:31-39). Obviously the gospels believe they are more than just “historically reliable” – they make the claim of absolute reliability, even to verb tense in the text. On this basis the critics reason and conclude:

1. The gospels claim they are absolutely reliable and trustworthy.
2. If one genuine historical error is found in the gospels, then they are not absolutely reliable and trustworthy.

3. The historical account of gospel(x) is contrary to the verifiable evidence of external1(x) and external2(x). Therefore there is a genuine historical error in the gospels.

4. An historical document that is not absolutely reliable and trustworthy, but claims to be, does so in a reckless manner. Therefore the gospel authors and the historical accounts they record must be viewed with suspicion.

5. The fantastic and supernatural historical accounts found in the gospels should be the first viewed with suspicion, since we would naturally be suspicious if someone made similar claims today.

Any thinking person that has contact with an informed critic will soon discover that this issue greatly contributes to his doubt of the gospel witness. I wish Blomberg and others would address this formidable problem and not dismiss it as unfair one-sided criticism. HRG would be vastly improved if this line of reasoning were given some attention and interaction.

HRG has a primary and secondary hypothesis. First and more importantly, that the gospels are generally historically reliable. Once this view is defended and accepted, the question then becomes how should be interpret the gospels (i.e., is there a superior interpretative method for gospel analysis)? Each major school of gospel interpretation is examined, and they are all shown to potentially provide valuable insights into our knowledge and understanding of the gospels, but only if they are used in a properly traditional manner. Blomberg writes of form, redaction, midrash, new hermeneutic, structuralist and post-structuralist, and finally social scientific methods of interpreting the gospels when he concludes:
“The thrust of this survey of new methods for gospel study is clear. The challenges they have posed to the historical reliability of the gospels all fail to overthrow the traditional confidence in that reliability which older commentators more consistently displayed. In fact, all the methods can be used, though sometimes in quite modified form, to strengthen that confidence. If the debate about the historicity of the gospels is to advance any further, it must be not on the basis of new methods of study but on the actual details of the texts themselves.” (page 72)

HRG is correct to subject our method of study to the actual text of the gospels. This is both responsible scholarship and proper in light of the humility Christians are required to bring to the scriptures. Yes, we are responsible to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), but ultimately we must not sit in judgment of God’s word but rather allow the text to interpret us (2 Tim 3:15-17). The words of Jesus are powerful and bring life to those who hear and do them, and condemn those who do not believe (John 3:16-19). These life-giving words we will find from no other (John 6:67-69). The ability to rely on the gospel witness is integral to the Christian’s faith and his desire to share it with the world. We are all members of the jury for this most important trial. Blomberg and his defense in HRG have given me confidence in the historical reliability of the gospel accounts. I vote “Not Guilty”! You, fellow juror, what is your verdict?