

The Criterion of Embarrassment and the Women of Luke

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Introduction

The Criterion of Embarrassment is an oft-used historical tool by those who seek to authenticate and validate the New Testament Gospels insofar as they are understood as historical literature.¹ However, a thoughtful review of this historical tool in light of the Gospel attributed to Luke presents with it a convincing counter-argument to the usefulness and authority of this tool. The role of women in antiquity, especially those in the Graeco-Roman period within Jerusalem and its surrounding area presents with it a complexity that is not always readily understood or consistent. Women are revered and respected in the Hebrew Bible's narratives, Jerusalem itself has had a woman ruler in the century previous to the time of Jesus the Christ.² The presuppositional understanding then that the testimony of the women at the tomb were taken to be less authoritative and thus embarrassing for the Gospel authors to include due to their sex ignores the intra-Gospel narrative framework attributed to Luke and the normative gender standards during the first century of the common era.

1. Rodríguez, Rafael. "Criterion of Embarrassment." *Criterion of Embarrassment*. Accessed March 19, 2018.
<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/criterion-of-embarrassment>

2. Wilson, Barrie A. *How Jesus Became Christian*. (Toronto, ON: Random House Canada, 2008), 32. (The woman ruler known as Salome Alexandra).

Defining the Criterion

One such definition that generally summarizes the criterion is put forth by Michael Patton of the Dallas Theological Seminary, he says, “This is a criteria [*sic*] that helps historians determine the truthfulness of historic accounts. The basic idea is this: when people lie, embellish, or make stories up, they normally do not include material that causes them to lose credibility.”³ Popular usage of this criterion can be seen with the women’s witness following the Gospel narrative crucifixion of Jesus the Christ with the women at the tomb, as is exhibited by Craig Keener.

The witness of women at the tomb is very likely historical, precisely because it was so offensive to the larger culture — not the sort of testimony one would invent. Not all testimony was regarded as being of equal merit; the trustworthiness of witnesses was considered essential. Yet most of Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries held much less esteem for the testimony of women than for that of men; this suspicion reflects a broader Mediterranean limited trust of women’s speech and testimony also enshrined in Roman law.⁴

This is similarly put by Rafael Rodriguez, an Associate Professor of New Testament at Johnson University, he elaborates as follows:

One of the historians’ favorite tools is the criterion of embarrassment, which affirms the authenticity of stories and sayings that, as John P. Meier wrote, “would have embarrassed or created difficulty for the early Church.” Since we can expect that Jesus’ followers would not have embellished or created material that embarrassed them, any embarrassing material probably accurately reports history.⁵

3. Patton, Michael C. "Eight Reasons Why the Gospels Are Embarrassing." CredoHouse - Making Theology Accessible. February 12, 2016. Accessed March 19, 2018. <http://credohouse.org/blog/why-the-gospels-are-embarrassing>.

4. Keener, Craig S. *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans 2012), 331.

5. Rodríguez, Rafael. "Criterion of Embarrassment." *Criterion of Embarrassment*. Accessed March 19, 2018. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/criterion-of-embarrassment>

Critique of this Criterion

The usage of this criterion among others in popular discourse and apologetics has drawn the ire and criticism of many. Indeed, in Rodriguez's own article, he mentions, "Recently, however, a number of historians have questioned the logic of the criterion of embarrassment..."⁶ He further elaborates on this trend by mentioning the faults attributed to these criteria and the methodology associated with them.

The criteria of authenticity, then, do not enable historians to separate the Gospels' stories into two piles in any straightforward way. Perhaps the problem is not just that we have turned to the wrong tools to help us separate authentic from inauthentic material. The problem could be the task itself. Instead of sifting through the Gospels looking for authentic material, historians are beginning to look at the Gospels as coherent presentations of Jesus, each with their own perspective.⁷

Much sterner and frank criticism comes from Professor Dale C. Allison Jr., he states that, "Surely we are no closer to any uniformity of results to-day than we would have been had we never heard of dissimilarity, multiple attestation, coherence, and embarrassment."⁸ Yet these are not his final words on the matter, within the same book he fleshes out his criticism in several paragraphs that deserve further reading, but of which are summarised hereunder.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Allison, Dale C., Jr.. *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Kindle Locations 768-769). Kindle Edition.

Scholars have, since the 1960s, often discussed the so-called criteria of authenticity, the sieves by which we supposedly enable ourselves to pan for original nuggets from Jesus. The names of the chief criteria are now well known: multiple attestation, dissimilarity, embarrassment, coherence. While they all at first glance appeal to common sense, further scrutiny reveals that they are fatally flawed.⁹

He thereby concludes as follows, "I do not, however, wish to review here the defects of the traditional criteria. Those failings have become increasingly apparent over the last two decades, and much of the discussion is becoming tedious because repetitious: we have entered an echo chamber."¹⁰ It is within the purview of this study however to discuss the faults of one such criterion, the Criterion of Embarrassment. Stanley Porter in his referencing of John Meier's support for and criticism of this criterion, elaborates on its limitations:

Meier and others also recognize limitations to this criterion, however. These include the fact that such clear-cut cases of embarrassment as those noted just above are few in the Gospels, and, perhaps more importantly for historical-Jesus research, not sufficient to get anything close to a full, complete or even representative picture of Jesus. It would indeed be an odd portrait of Jesus, if all that he is recorded as doing or saying were things embarrassing to the early Church. Another limitation of this criterion is that determining what might have been embarrassing to the early Church is also very difficult. This is due especially to the lack of detailed evidence for the thought of the early Church, apart from that found in the New Testament. An example that Meier gives is Jesus' supposed words of dereliction on the cross, Ps. 22.1. Meier argues that these were not words of dereliction at all, even though many in the early Church, including the authors of Luke's and John's Gospels, may have taken them in that way.¹¹

9. Ibid, 721-723.

10. Ibid, 725-726.

11. Porter, Stanley. "The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement*, 191st ser. (2000): 109. Accessed March 19, 2018.

The Lukan Narrative

We read as follows from Luke 8:1-4 (NIV):

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; 3 Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. 4 While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable...¹²

What follows from here is the Parable of the Sower, though it is not included as our interests are limited to the role of the women and their authority according to the Lukan narrative. These passages communicate a lot of important information, what we are told is that women are among those traveling with Jesus the Christ from town to town. We are then told about these women and their importance to the ministry of Jesus. Who are these women? They are publicly named as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. Many would strive to argue that, as has been exhibited above, women's witness was seen as something inferior during this period in time. However, Mary Magdalene is not a hidden figure, the Lukan author does not render her with *many others*, as Jesus is witnessing from town to town, it can therefore be understood that she stands as a proof of his authority, as a proof of his ability to cure whatever maladies the masses faced. The Lukan narrative explicitly states that the women (in his family) interacted with the crowd publicly, therefore it is not unreasonable to view Mary Magdalene as interacting with the crowds in this way.¹³

12. "BibleGateway." Luke 8:1-4 NIV - - Bible Gateway. Accessed March 19, 2018. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke 8:1-4&version=NIV>.

13. Ibid, Luke 8:19.

Contrary to such a claim of the women's witness not being accepted, within the same chapter between verses 43 and 47 it can be demonstrated that Jesus publicly interacted with a woman and had no qualms in showing the public that she could be healed by him, in that sense, effectively making her a public witness to the ability and authority of Jesus the Christ.

43 And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years,[c] but no one could heal her. 44 She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped. 45 "Who touched me?" Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you." 46 But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me." 47 Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. 48 Then he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace."¹⁴

In addition to what has already been stated, the Lukan narrative's framing of the women is important. The author specifically mentions the name of three women, two of whom will be discussed now, not only had one of them been cured (Mary), and another a political heavyweight (Joanna's husband worked for Herod), but these two women are also specifically mentioned as the witnesses who saw the empty tomb and spoke to Jesus after his death.¹⁵ Therefore, the importance of highlighting the women in this chapter can be understood as the author drawing attention to the significance of these women.

14. Ibid, Luke 8:43-47.

15. Ibid, Luke 24:10.

Luke 8:3b says, "These women were helping to support them out of their own means."¹⁶ The three women are notable, not only for their relationships with Jesus but also due to their general resources, including their finances.¹⁷ At one point, Patton, Keener, William Lane Craig and others would have us believe that these women's witness was embarrassing and so not accepted (on the basis of the witnesses being female), while on the other hand the Lukan narrative would have us believe that not only did they have a personal relationship with Jesus the Christ and his ministry, and that they were in the crowds that followed him and well-known to the disciples, but that they were also wealthy or resourceful enough to provide sustenance for Jesus and his disciples. In other words, the Lukan narrative would have us believe that there was no need to be embarrassed by these popular, faithful, and resourceful women. Should we reason then, according to Patton, Keener, William Lane Craig and others that Jesus and the disciples were more than willing to accept the women's resources but not willing to accept their testimony?

The Lukan narrative makes the position of embarrassment impossible, the women are important, well-known, controlling and providing resources for the ministry out of their own resources. As such, it can therefore be concluded that there was no reason to assume the women's testimony could be embarrassing because they were women. Since the women travelled with Jesus from Galilee, Jesus and his ministry would have had to trust what these women said about their own resources and means along the way, to claim otherwise would be to deny the text at hand.¹⁸ All narratives have a framework that facilitates the way that the narrative is presented, this can also be seen with the aforementioned verses in the sense that the women are made to look authoritative and important in Luke 8, later in Luke 23:55 we are then informed that these women were also specifically the ones along with Joseph to see the tomb of Jesus

and his body within in the tomb as the Gospel states, “The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it.”¹⁹

Finally, with the women firmly placed in the narrative, their grand importance is given its full due when these women are to whom Jesus the Christ is alleged to have the angels spoken with after his resurrection and to whom he has made them the first and only bearers of his message immediately post-resurrection, “When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.”²⁰ This means of framing has not gone unnoticed, one commentator has gone so far as to argue that one of these women was the historical source behind the Lukan Gospel, “St. Luke alone names the latter in the Resurrection history, as he alone had named her before, as following our Lord in Galilee (Luke 7:2). It is not an unreasonable inference from this that she was probably his chief informant.”²¹

16. Ibid, Luke 8:3.

17. Wilson, Barrie A. *How Jesus Became Christian*. (Toronto, ON: Random House Canada, 2008), 32.

18. "BibleGateway." Luke 24:55 NIV - - Bible Gateway. Accessed March 19, 2018. [https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke 24%3A55&version=NIV](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%2024%3A55&version=NIV).

19. Ibid, Luke 23:55.

20. Ibid, Luke 24:9-10.

21. Ellicott, Charles. "Luke 24 Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers." Bible Hub. Accessed March 19, 2018. <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/luke/24.htm>.

The Textual Evidence

Our earliest extant manuscript of Luke 8:1-4 is found in P⁷⁵ which is housed at the *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* in Vatican City. The papyrus itself contains some 50 leaves, it measures 130 mm by 260 mm, it contains one column and thirty-eight lines.²² Leaf 15 *verso*, is extremely laconic, and as such only a few words can be understood with respect to Luke 8:1-4. Line 26 which is of interest to us reads in total as follows:²³

26 | αυτ

This presents us with a problem, as there is an issue with Luke 8:3, which reads, “These women were helping to support them out of their own means.”²⁴ The issue begins with the pronoun “them”, this rendition of the passage seems to indicate that the aforementioned women were providing for the disciples, effectively Jesus’s ministry. If the pronoun is “them” as in the Koine Greek word αυτοις it would then mean that the women had to have considerably much more financial means than one would initially assume.²⁵ On the other hand, the wealth required is much greatly lessened if the pronoun to be used is “him”, referring to Jesus alone. This would be the Koine Greek word αυτω.²⁶ Comparing with other manuscripts also presents a problem as they are divided relatively equally with B D K W Γ Δ Θ f³ 700. 892. and others using the plural “them” (αυτοις),²⁷ while κ A L Ψ f¹ and others used the singular “him” (αυτω).²⁸

In the end, neither variant affects the understanding of Luke 8:1-4 as has been thoroughly explicated above.

22. Brannan, Rick, ed. *New Testament Manuscript Explorer*. Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2015.

23. "10075." Manuscript Workspace - INTF. Accessed March 19, 2018. <http://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/manuscript-workspace/?docID=10075>. (While the manuscript contains majuscule Koine text the transcriptions available use minuscule text.)

24. "BibleGateway." Luke 8:1-4 NIV - - Bible Gateway. Accessed March 19, 2018. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke 8:1-4&version=NIV>.

25. Comfort, Philip Wesley. *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary: Commentary on the Variant Readings of the Ancient New Testament Manuscripts and How They Relate to the Major English Translations* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008), 189.

26. Ibid.

27. Nestle, Eberhard, Erwin Nestle, Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, and Holger Strutwolf. *Novum Testamentum Graece* (3rd ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), 211.

28. Comfort, Philip Wesley. *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary: Commentary on the Variant Readings of the Ancient New Testament Manuscripts and How They Relate to the Major English Translations* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008), 189.

Conclusion

The Criterion of Embarrassment has been found to be doubtful in its value as being a reliable source of determining the historical veracity of passages in the New Testament. While its use in apologetics is very common, the public largely remains unaware as to scholarship's disdain, dislike and derision regarding it. As has been demonstrated, the use of the Criterion to validate the testimony of the women, by inferring that their witness must be deficient due to their sex is highly problematic, if not borderline sexist. Embarrassment cannot be cast upon the women or their witness given the narrative framework as developed by Lukan authorship. This would therefore render the Criterion itself irrelevant and as to its validating the testimony of the women regarding Christ's tomb, by virtue of the method of reaching that validation being invalidated, their statement too now rests in doubt unless one has another means by which to establish its reliability.

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