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The New Testament Gospels as Biblical Rewritings To the Question of Referentiality

In 1993, in a discussion of fictionality and loyalty to tradition in the Gospel of Matthew, Ulrich Luz pointed out that the writer of Matthew had made substantial changes in the Jesus traditions as taken over from the Gospel of Mark and that in some cases he had even created traditions of his own. The author of Matthews thus consciously engaged in the fabrication of fiction. Nevertheless, according to Luz, he seems to have been unaware of the problem of fiction. Throughout his narrative, he clearly expects his readers to accept the referentiality of what is told. This lack of awareness of the differences between fact and fiction places him outside the borderlines of ancient history writing. For parallels to this phenomenon, Luz points to the story of Moses in Deuteronomy and that of the patriarchs in Jubilees. These books, however, are examples of “Rewritten Bible.” This raises the question of whether, with regard to the question of referentiality, the New Testament gospels should be understood to have been written on the same presuppositions as the books normally categorized as “Rewritten Bible.”

If the canonical gospels may thus be defined as instances of “Rewritten Bible,” it invites the reader to understand these writings not as sources to the life and history of Jesus, but rather as different steps in a reception history through which the various traditions about Jesus were continually being rewritten and supplemented in accordance with changing theologies and churchly demands.

As for nomenclature I propose that the label “biblical rewritings” should be used of books that claim to pass on authoritative divine history and were intended for use in preaching and teaching. Geza Vermes’ ingenious invention of the term “Rewritten Bible” may thus also help us understand what went on when the authors of the Gospels of Matthew, John and Luke took over the new genre created by the author of Mark’s Gospel while changing, adding, and detracting material in a, to our eyes, arbitrary way – and apparently without any awareness of the question of referentiality. Thus, the *tertium comparationis* was obviously not “the historical Jesus” but the revelation thought to be brought about through him.

The freedom and creativity in the process of rewriting will be shown by following the development in the gospels in their stories about the baptism of Jesus.