Referencing conclusions for filtering and interpreting the New Testament

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We are going here to discuss the meaning of "referencing conclusions" at the end of this article. But before that, we need to discuss the reasons for needing the tools for filtering and interpreting the New Testament (NT). I need to clarify here that his article is not into metaphysics or apologetics, it is just a scientific historical discussion (see article #54.02 in the library-site: "The general methodology for analyzing metaphysical subjects" for the definition of "Scientific History").

The details about Jesus are very limited as they were recorded mostly in four Gospels. The words count for these Gospels is 64,767 words. So, the details of Jesus are in a folder that has only 162 pages (with about 400 words per page). As many of the stories and details in this folder are repeated, then the details of Jesus without repetition is contained in much less than 162 pages. This is what we know about Jesus.

Also, the Gospels are based on professional copies of lose copies of the original copies that were written by anonymous authors based on "anonymous oral tradition" of passing stories from one generation to the next.

So, the stories that are related to Jesus went through 5 stages from Jesus to us:

1# Anonymous witnesses: people who talked about what they have seen.

2# Anonymous Oral Tradition with Aramaic-Greek translations for about 60 years:

There are two types of Oral Traditions: Anonymous Oral Tradition (ORI) and Chain Oral Tradition (ORII).

In the first type (ORI) the stories are passed through the generations by anonymous sources. For example, you have a story of an event, and you probably remember who told you this story (let him be X), but you don't know who told X, and you don't know the sources between X to the original witness of this event.

In the second type (ORII) the stories are passed through the generations by known sources up to the original witnesses. So, you have a story of an event, and you know who told you this story (let him be X), and you know who told X, and you know the chain of sources of this story between X to the original witness of this event.

The Christian historical stories were passed through ORI until they were documented by anonymous authors.

3# Anonymous authors: These authors had collected and documented some of the stories that were circulating at their time.

4# Lose copies of lose copies for about 70 years: At this stage, the above books were copied and circulated by <u>unprofessional scribes</u>.

5# The professional stage: This stage could have started about 170AD. In this stage, Churches started to recruit professional scribes for coping the Gospels.

The first three stages are accepted by most Scholars, but the last two stages are adopted by some Scholars and it is still a topic for argument. Some scholars might adopt the position that the Gospels were genuinely copied from the start to the end. We should also clarify that the boundaries between the last two stages are vague: It is not clear how was the transition from the "lose copies" stage to the next one.

However, there are some data that could indicate that these last two stages really occurred. There are about 5000 ancient manuscripts of the New Testament that have been recovered (totally or partially), with the earliest fragment from the 2nd century. It has been estimated that there are 400,000 differences between these manuscripts (Ref: Daniel Wallace). This raised the well-known comment that there are differences in the NT that are more than the number of words in it (which is about 179,000 words).

But this doesn't feel right, does it?

There are two ways (that I am aware of) for counting differences. Let us suppose the following words are from a verse in three manuscripts:

Manuscript-1: A B C D E
Manuscript-2: A B C G E
Manuscript-3: A B C M E

Type-I counting would conclude that there are 3 differences here, which are: D, G, and M. While Type-II counting would conclude that there is only one difference here at the word number 4, which has three options: D, G, or M.

I am assuming here that Scholars are using Type-I counting. This could explain the large number of differences that they have found.

However, most of these differences are insignificant. This would include scriber errors, different words with equivalent meanings, missing words that doesn't change the meaning, etc.

But there are few differences that are serious, contradictory and very significant. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any book or paper that give some statistics related to these differences. I did ask Bart Ehrman at his blog about the number of these differences and he said: "Dozens? Many dozens". So, if we could take this literally then there are about (or at least) 100 significant differences between these manuscripts.

Notice that we are <u>not</u> talking about the differences between different books in the NT: We are <u>not</u> talking about the differences between Mark and Luke, but we are taking about the differences between Mark in one manuscript to Mark in another manuscript.

These differences could provide a legitimate support for the last two stages of the previous model, specially that most of the 5000 manuscripts are from the "professional stage".

Therefore, we can't (from a Scientific Historical Perspective) take these books and records on absolute face value, as they were based on anonymous witnesses to anonymous sources until they were finally documented by anonymous authors, and there are many differences and contradictions between different books and different manuscripts.

But equally, we cannot just reject all these records as it can be proven (by looking at different civilizations and communities) that knowledge based on "anonymous oral tradition" can contain true information. Therefore, we have records that some of them are true, some of them are exaggerated, and some of them are false,, and we need to establish a way to recognize the possible true from the definite false.

The Scholars of this field have established a set of criteria (tools) to help in this regard, and I am going to list here a few:

1# The criterion of independent attestation (or the criterion of multiple attestation): many independent sources provide high probability for accuracy.

2# The criterion of dissimilarity: When a statement has been preserved and it is against the mood of the people who preserved it, then this is an interesting variance that could have a good probability for accuracy.

3# The criterion of contextual credibility: Which looks at the backgrounds in terms of the social and political norms at the time of the event. These backgrounds can be used as a reference to distinguish between what is logical and what is not in the texts regarding the event.

These are the most famous criterions in this field (Ref: Ehrman, Martin), but I found one criterion that is really interesting:

4# The criterion of embarrassment: Known churches or leaders will probably not invent or fabricate an account as this could result in an embarrassment in front of their peers (Ref: Wiki-Quest)

There are also many other criterions that have been suggested including: The criterion of consistency, criterion of rejection and execution, criterion of historical plausibility, and criterion of congruence, etc.

> I am not really content with the "criterion of dissimilarity" because it contradicts with the "criterion of embarrassment": The criterion of dissimilarity cannot be applied on the "Lose Copies" stage (or before) as we know nothing about this stage, and the mood at this stage was moody and constantly changing, and even the scribes of this stage probably didn't know exactly the meaning of what they were copying. Equally, we cannot totally apply this criterion on the "professional stage" because scribes at this stage would probably be reluctant to change the problematic text in fear of embarrassment as it could be discovered by rival churches and could cause a

serious scandal. It was easy in this stage to present an interpretation for the problematic text rather than altering the text itself. Therefore, the "criterion of dissimilarity" does give signs for anomalies, which are fun to study, but I don't think it would give strong signs for accuracy.

There might be some disagreements about the previous criterions, but it is still based on common sense. However, it seems to me that common sense and "common-sensed criterions" are not enough: It is very rarely to see two mathematicians arguing about a mathematical concept. Also, the differences between physicists are limited even in the most confusing field (Quantum Physics) in which most of yesterday's differences have been resolved today, and there are new differences today that would probably be resolved tomorrow.

So, there is a tendency for convergence in most fields of knowledge. But in the field of Early Christian History, the problems of yesterday are (almost) still the problems of today with a new set of extra problems. So, we can see divergence (or at least slow convergence) in this field of knowledge.

I want here to suggest a tool that might help to form a quick convergence in this field of knowledge. This tool is the "Referencing conclusions", which are answers to very short questions that have only two possible answers (Yes or No):

1. Was Jesus a simplistic man, or was he an extraordinary man?
2. Was Jesus literate or illiterate?
3. Did Jesus say he is god, or he didn't?
4. Did Jesus ask people to worship him, or he didn't?
5. Did Jesus refer to God as "The Father", or he didn't?
6. Did Jesus refer to himself as the "Son of God", or he didn't?

We could probably find about 15 main questions like the above. These questions are short with answers that are mostly dependent on the political and social background of the Jewish community at the time of Jesus. Therefore, we could possibly (with time and serious discussions) reach some shared answers for these questions.

I am certain that the above questions have been discussed before, but they were discussed from a marginal level. What I am suggesting here is that these questions should be discussed to form a tool for filtering and interpreting the records in the NT.

How the answers in the above list can create this tool?

If we regarded Jesus to be literate, then we would filter and interpret the historical data differently than if we regarded him to be illiterate.

Therefore, the answers for the above short questions can guide us in filtering and interpreting the NT. So, if we had a List of accepted answers of the above questions, and there is a story in the NT that completely contradict with the list, then we have three options:

- To try and find an accepted reconciliation between the story and the list.
- To try and a find a possible and logical modification to the story that can fit with the list.

- To reject the story.

The previous approach is logical: whenever we find contradicting data then we will try our best to identify the <u>most simple and logical data</u> and then use it to interpret or reject the contradicting data.

I will put here my list of answers to the above questions:

1. Was Jesus a simplistic man or was he an extraordinary man?
   <u>He was an extraordinary man</u> (Ref: Om-1).

2. Was Jesus literate or illiterate?
   <u>He was literate</u> (Ref: Om-1).

3. Did Jesus say he is god, or he didn't?
   <u>He didn't refer to himself as God</u> (This will be discussed later).

4. Did Jesus ask people to worship him, or he didn't?
   <u>He didn't ask people to worship him</u> (this follows from the previous answer).

5. Did Jesus refer to God as "The Father", or he didn't?
   <u>He didn't refer to God as the Father</u> (Ref: Om-1).

6. Did Jesus refer to himself as the Son of God, or he didn't?
   <u>He didn't refer to himself as the Son of God</u> (Ref: Om-1).

For question #3: There are two sets of data in the Gospels: the first set shows that Jesus was not God, while the second set shows that Jesus was a true God. Therefore, there are two camps: the first camp adopts the first set and then use it to interpret or reject the second set. The second camp do the same using the other set.

However, the second set doesn't fit with the scientific historical perspective. Therefore, we should use the first set to interpret or reject the second set.

The data related to the first set are:

#Numbers 23.19: God is not a man, that He should lie; neither the son of man, that He should repent.

> [Note that Jesus has described himself many times in the gospels to be the son of man].

#Mark 9.37: Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.

#Mark 10.17: As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. Good teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life? 18 Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good—except God alone.

#Mark 12.29: The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

#Mark 13.32: But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

#Matthew 7.21: Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

#Matthew 26.39: Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.

#Matthew 26.46: About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli,[c] lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

#Luke 6.12: One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray and spent the night praying to God.

#John 5.30: By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.

#John 7.16: Jesus answered, My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me.

#John 7.28: Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, 29 but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.

#John 8.28: So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up[a] the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.

#John 8.42: Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me.

#John 12.49: For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken.

#John 13.20: Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me.

#John 14.28: You heard me say, I am going away and I am coming back to you. If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.

#John 20.17: Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

#Act 2.22: Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

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The following are some examples of using the above list in filtering and interpreting the records in the NT:

1# "The Father": We could interpret all the records in NT that refer to God as "The Father" as the Greek translation for either: Adonai, Hashem, or Elohim (Ref: Om-1).

2# "The Son of God": We could interpret all the records in NT that refer to Jesus as "Son of God" as the Greek translation to the expressions: "Slave of God" or "Servant of God" (Ref: Om-1).

3# John 20.26:

> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." 28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed".

Now ... If we accepted that Jesus didn't refer to himself as God, then the words underlined need to be interpret accordingly (or to be rejected). However, there is a logical interpretation that can fit with the list: Thomas didn't refer to Jesus as "My Lord and my God" but these words were exclamation that people are still using today; as people would say at some sudden events: "Oh my God" (Ref: Deedat 2:24:00).

4# John 10.30: "I and the Father are one".

Ahmad Deedat (previous Ref: 1:38:00) argued that the context from John 10.22 to 10.39 would clearly reject the meaning that Jesus is regarding himself as one with God, but as one with God in purpose. He supported this suggestion (previous Ref: 2:35:00) by quoting John 17.20 as Jesus regarded himself and his disciples as one with God.

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