



The Michael Ramsey Prize

for theological writing

www.michaelramseyprize.org.uk

1. Why did you write this book?

This is a book I could not have written at an earlier point in my career, because the overall argument draws on many areas of study and expertise that I was able to bring together as I developed it. I never actually set out to write a major book arguing for a new paradigm in Gospels study, but began from a few ideas that had come to me about the significance of names in the Gospels, about what Papias meant when he wrote about eyewitness testimony, and about the origins of the Gospel of John. I thought it would be a short but suggestive book, but the argument developed, so it seemed, of its own accord and I just followed where it led, drawing in other areas of study as they seemed required by the way the argument developed. I think I was personally most pleased with the book because of the way the argument developed organically. Fortunately, I had a year's sabbatical leave in which to let it do so. Of course, I was aware all along that this was an area of truly central importance both for New Testament studies and for Christian faith, but did not really expect to have such a comprehensive new paradigm to propose until it emerged. Nor did I start with a traditional ('pre-critical') view of the Gospels that I wanted to prove. A lot of my own ideas changed in the course of writing the book and discovering where the arguments led.

2. What is the central idea of your book?

The book has both a historical argument and a theological argument, both centred on the notion of eyewitness testimony. The historical argument (most of the book) is that the eyewitnesses of the events of the Gospel history remained, throughout their lives, the authoritative sources and guarantors of the traditions about Jesus, and that the texts of our Gospels are much closer to the way the eyewitnesses told their stories than has been generally thought in mainstream New Testament scholarship in the twentieth century. Since the rise of the approach to the study of the Gospels known as 'form criticism,' early in the last century, most scholars have supposed that, while the eyewitnesses originated (at least some of) the traditions about Jesus, these were then transmitted as anonymous traditions in the early Christian communities, developing in all sorts of ways in the process, and reached the Gospel writers as the product of such community transmission and development. My book aims to put the eyewitnesses back into our understanding of how the traditions about Jesus reached the writers of the Gospels. One of the Gospels (John) I argue was written by an eyewitness, while the others are based quite closely on the testimony of the eyewitnesses.

The theological argument (in the final chapter) concerns what is usually called the distinction between the Christ of faith (Jesus as the Gospels portray him and as Christians believe in him) and the Jesus of history (Jesus as historians, digging behind the Gospels, reconstruct him). I argue that, since the Gospels embody the testimony of the eyewitnesses, the category of testimony offers us a way beyond this dichotomy. It is both the historical category appropriate to the sort of history the Gospels are and the theological category appropriate to the sort of accounts of Jesus that Christian faith

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requires for belief in and discipleship of Jesus. The Gospels, I suggest, give us the 'Jesus of testimony' – not, of course, an uninterpreted Jesus (all history is an inextricable blend of fact and meaning), but Jesus as the eyewitness participants in his history, the 'insiders' to the events, remembered and presented him.

3. Why is this topic of particular relevance to the Church in the twenty-first century?

I guess most Christians still take it for granted that the Gospels provide us with eyewitness testimony to Jesus. But for a long time this has not been the view of most New Testament scholars. The idea that the 'real Jesus' was not as the Gospels present him, but a very different figure as reconstructed by historians, often seems problematic to Christian believers who encounter it, especially since the media usually give prominence to those scholars who are the most sceptical about the historical value of the Gospels and come up with reconstructions of the historical Jesus very different from the way the Gospels portray him (and often quite bizarre). I think those Christians are right to find this problematic, and the fact that some retreat into a fundamentalist attitude to the Gospels is understandable. Christian faith has always trusted that the Jesus it finds in the Gospels is the 'real Jesus' – an interpreted Jesus, to be sure, Jesus as perceived by the first Christians, but Jesus interpreted in a way that is true to, rather than distorting, his historical reality, Jesus as he was perceived and understood by those who were closest to him. As the church moves into the twenty-first century these questions are vital for its faith. I hope my book gives Christian believers good reasons for confidence that the Jesus they find in the Gospels is the real Jesus.

At the same time, I would like to stress that my book is not merely a piece of apologetic. I think it has been becoming more and more apparent (for example, from recent study of oral tradition in many societies today) that what has been in the twentieth century the dominant scholarly approach to the Gospels has very serious flaws. It is ripe for radical reassessment. While my conclusions are relatively close to traditional views of the Gospels, I do not fall back on traditional arguments, but offer a series of novel considerations that have led even most of my most hostile reviewers to say that my arguments will need to be taken very seriously. I am suggesting a new paradigm for historical study of the Gospels that I think can be seen to be needed at the present juncture of Gospels study, and this is why it has been very widely welcomed, especially by younger scholars within the discipline. Such a development in Gospels study, one that models a comprehensive new approach, cannot but prove important for the church.

4. Describe your ideal reader.

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My ideal reader would be someone with a serious interest in Jesus and the Gospels, who finds historical argument engaging, and who, whatever they already think, is open to fresh arguments.

5. Do you need a degree in theology to read and understand your book?

I suppose if the answer were yes, that would disqualify the book from the Michael Ramsey prize! I cannot pretend that the book is an easy read. In the nature of the case, there is a lot of quite complex argument. An innovative approach to the Gospels could not hope to convince anyone otherwise. But I had in mind throughout readers who do not have a degree in theology and tried to explain things as clearly as possible. It's a demanding read, I'm sure, but my impression is that it has been appreciated by quite a wide range of people.

6. Why is theology more important than ever today?

I think theology is certainly *as* important as ever. One interesting development is the amount of discussion of theological (especially biblical) matters that now goes on the Web, which has given a lot of people the opportunity to engage for themselves in the kind of discussions that used to happen mostly only in academic contexts. People don't just receive what academics hand down via the clergy, but can think about these things themselves in dialogue with others. I think this may prove a valuable counterweight to the tendency of increasingly specialized academic work to address only a small circle of other specialists. (Of course there is wacky nonsense on the Web, but so there is also in academic publications!)

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