

Nicholas Perrin, *Lost in Transmission? What Can We Know about the Words of Jesus?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007)

Nicholas Perrin (Assistant Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, Illinois) provides an eminently readable and robust evangelical defence of the historical reliability of the Gospels in his *Lost in Transmission? What Can We Know about the Words of Jesus?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007). Although the title suggests that Perrin's book might be narrowly concerned with New Testament textual criticism, *Lost in Transmission?* actually presents a broad-ranging critical engagement with Bart Ehrman's popular book *Misquoting Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), and successfully combines this with a personal invitation to Christian faith. It addresses head on the basic question raised by Ehrman's book: can we know the real Jesus, or has he been 'lost in transmission'?

The book is well conceived and eloquently executed. In the first three chapters, Perrin addresses the underlying presuppositions which 'set the rules' for how we might come to a genuine understanding of Jesus. This lays the groundwork for what follows in chapters 4-12, where Perrin introduces the methods of responsible 'Jesus scholarship', outlines the portrait of Jesus that emerges from this work, and explores the theological and personal implications which it entails. The real brilliance of the Perrin's book, however, lies in the way that he has seamlessly woven his own personal story into the fabric of the whole. As he develops his argument, so he also shares his personal story of movement from sceptical agnosticism to Christian faith. These autobiographical elements provide a winsome and powerful counterpoint to the familiar liberal story (epitomised by Bart Ehrman) of the journey from conservative teenage faith to 'mature' and 'learned' scepticism. Perrin's story, told with humour and humility, shows that the exact opposite is just as possible.

Chapter 1 demonstrates that our assumptions about the existence and nature of God are inextricably linked to how we approach the study of history, especially when it comes to the history of Jesus. Perrin thus effectively debunks the myth of logical positivism which assumes that it is possible to approach the Gospels 'objectively', without any prior commitments. He argues, instead, that the more honest way forward is to acknowledge where we presently stand and to be aware of the effect this might have on how we go about investigating Jesus.

Chapter 2 addresses the basic question of the existence of Jesus as a figure in history. This is perhaps the weakest part of the book, since here Perrin contents himself with showing the flaws in a recent argument against the existence of Jesus (T. Freke and P. Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the Original Jesus a Pagan God*, (New York: Three Rivers, 1999). While the arguments Perrin advances against Freke and Gandy are certainly convincing, they are not accompanied by any consideration of the positive evidence for Jesus' historical existence which would have conclusively grounded his case. For these details, the best recent popular treatment is John Dickson, *The Christ Files: How Historians Know What They Know about Jesus* (Sydney: Bluebottle, 2005).

By contrast, Chapter 3, titled 'Faith, History and Certitude', is one of the gems of Perrin's book. Here he outlines, with remarkable simplicity, a nuanced biblical epistemology (theory of knowledge) founded on the incarnation. Over against the flawed epistemological dualism bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment, which demands either blind faith or scientific certainty, Perrin explores the more robust

Christian alternative: certitude on the basis of evidence. Since God entered our world in the person of Christ, the path to genuine knowledge of him necessarily involves historical work and all of the messiness that entails: 'God's becoming flesh demands that the world of faith and the workaday world of time, space and history be one and the same' (p. 44). The unsatisfactory alternative, often embraced by conservative Christians, is to 'go back to pretending that the Bible and the words of Jesus just dropped out of heaven into our laps' (p. 44). But this is not the case: the Scriptures, not least the Gospels, are God's word written by human authors in space and time; they have come down to us by the very human process of transmission. For this reason 'history is an important midwife in the long, arduous, and mystery-laden delivery of the truth' (p. 47). This means that Christian faith does not take the character of mathematical certainty; but nor is it merely blind faith. On the contrary, Christian knowledge of God is first and foremost *relational* knowledge, and of necessity this knowledge rests on the historical evidence we have for Jesus. As Perrin concludes, 'if this should land us short of perfect certainty, it only means that we are not God' (p. 47).

In Chapters 4 & 5 Perrin pursues this line of argument, and provides a broad outline of Jesus' life and work as it emerges from the best historical sources we have, namely, the canonical Gospels. He argues convincingly, in line with much recent 'Jesus scholarship' in the so-called 'Third Quest of the Historical Jesus', that the key to understanding Jesus' mission and message is to recognise that he was a Jew, who addressed himself primarily to the covenant people of Israel. In this context, Jesus' mission is best understood as one of eschatological renewal: he inaugurated the promised kingdom of Israel's God; he foresaw the divinely ordained end of the temple in Jerusalem; and he sought to establish, ultimately by the sacrifice of himself, the new covenant community promised in the prophets. Jesus therefore gathered a following of people and imbued them with the consciousness that their destiny was to achieve the divine mission for Israel, namely to bring blessing to the nations in fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. In this historical reconstruction Perrin closely follows the interpretation of Jesus offered by N.T. Wright (for whom he previously worked as a research assistant) and thereby provides an accessible introduction to Wright's important contribution to our understanding of Jesus (at the popular level, see especially N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999)). Significantly, this whole line of argument stands in stark contrast to the vocal minority of Jesus scholars (eg. J.D. Crossan, B. Mack, F.G. Downing) who understand Jesus as a kind of hellenistic philosopher, a teacher of timeless moral truths and practical wisdom. As Perrin shows, however, this popular interpretation of Jesus is deeply suspect: not only does it fail to take account of the most important primary evidence; it also presents a Jesus who could quite happily endorse the pluralist assumptions of modern western liberalism. Perrin is right: this Jesus may be more palatable, but he is far less plausible.

These contradictory interpretations of Jesus in contemporary scholarship ('Jewish Messiah' vs. 'hellenistic philosopher') grow out of contrasting assessments of the usefulness and reliability of the canonical Gospels as historical sources. In Chapters 6-8, therefore, Perrin demonstrates that the four New Testament (NT) Gospels are in fact essentially reliable sources for Jesus' life and teaching. In chapter 6 Perrin argues, against the assumption of much 20th century scholarship (under the influence of Form Criticism), that the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels almost certainly go back to Jesus himself. To begin with, Perrin reasons (following B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998)) that since Jesus was Jewish it is most likely that he passed on his words in ways similar to the rabbis of the second century, whose students learnt their teaching by rote. More importantly, since Jesus was the founder of a renewal movement within Judaism, it is also highly likely that his disciples had a keen sense of the significance of his role as the 'bridge' between the old Israel and new covenant community, and therefore had every reason to remember and record his words accurately. Perrin's defence of the historical reliability of the Gospels here is, understandably, not exhaustive (compare eg., C.L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987)), but it is quite novel, and certainly historically very plausible. As Perrin notes, because his is a general thesis, it does not prove that the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are,

in every instance, a reliable record of what he said. Moreover, the fact that Jesus spoke mostly in Aramaic and our Gospels were written in Greek means that in all but a very few instances we don't have the *ipsisissima verba* (very words) of Jesus anyway, but a faithful record in translation. Nevertheless, Perrin is well justified in concluding that the arguments he offers do shift the burden of proof such that 'unless there are compelling reasons for not assigning certain words to Jesus, we should assume the master said it' as it is recorded (p. 93).

Chapters 7 & 8 proceed in the same vein, and engage with the common criticism that the four Gospels contradict and undermine one another. In response, Perrin offers a robust and nuanced discussion of the importance of recognising the purpose and perspective of each of the Gospels, and helpfully distinguishes between difference and contradiction. Differences between the Gospel accounts may be explained in a number of ways: in some cases Jesus may have said similar things on different occasions; in other cases it is enough to remember that the Gospel accounts (like all literary records of complex historical realities) are selective; in yet other cases differences may be explained by the diverse theological and literary emphases of the Gospel authors. If we approach the question with the requisite precision, Perrin argues, 'then we would be hard-pressed to find any one place in which the Gospels contradict each other' (p. 106). Again, his conclusion – based in a detailed treatment of some pertinent examples – is well justified: the NT Gospels are neither free from difficulty nor exhaustive, but they do provide us with four faithful portraits of the one Jesus.

The point here about the different perspectives of the Gospel authors is the most significant, and Perrin rightly emphasizes that in seeking to understand Jesus we need to both give due weight to the unique emphases of each Gospel, and to also put the four Gospels together to create a composite picture. Significantly, Perrin distinguishes between the truth of the gospel, which is Jesus himself, and the divinely authorized witnesses to Jesus that we have in the four canonical Gospels. This distinction is important, because it helps us to remember that 'no one Gospel gives an exhaustive account of Jesus Christ' (p. 122; cf. John 20.30; 21.25). This would, indeed, be true of any written source about a complex human person; how much more so when the subject of the work is the Son of God incarnate! For this reason 'the four Gospels create the framework for the truth and mark off its boundaries' but 'the truth, the essence of the gospel, lies in the space between the four Gospels'. This is because the truth is a person, Jesus Christ himself. In terms of the doctrine of Scripture, some may consider that Perrin is dangerously close here to an unhelpful Barthian distinction between Jesus as God's Word and the Gospels as mere witness to that Word. In my judgment, Perrin's repeated emphasis on the Gospels as revelatory documents is sufficient to guard against this danger. Either way, the point he makes is an important one: the fact that there are four Gospels rather than one reminds us 'that Jesus cannot be reduced ... to a datum, a system or an idea. In bringing light to darkness, God sent a life that was to be a light for all people. The light is so brilliant that no one window pane was enough to contain its glory' (p. 128). The four gospels are, therefore, our authoritative introductions to Jesus, invaluable until we meet him face to face.

In chapters 9-11 Perrin deals with the more detailed criticisms of the authority of the Gospels offered by Ehrman. Chapter 9 is an admirably non-technical introduction to the discipline of NT textual criticism and provides sound arguments for the essential reliability of the text of the NT as we have it today. Although the task of reconstructing the text of the original autographs is a painstaking one, the fact is that we have many more manuscript witnesses to the text of the NT than to any other comparable body of ancient literature. Moreover, the process of textual transmission in Christianity, as in Judaism, took place in the context of believing communities which placed an immeasurably high value on the integrity of the text because they saw it as the Word of God. Thus, although there are some points at which we cannot be certain about the reading of the original text, these are never doctrinally significant, and at any rate represent only a very small proportion of the text of the Gospels (Perrin estimates less than 1% for the Gospel of Mark: p. 144). Once again, it is hard to argue with Perrin's conclusion: 'the Jesus whom the first century Christians met in the four Gospels two thousand years ago is the very same Jesus we meet in our Bibles today' (p. 145).

Chapter 10 tackles the important question of the non-canonical Gospels, their place in early Christianity, and their significance for our understanding of Jesus. Perrin is a recognized expert on this topic, having completed his doctorate on the relationship between the *Gospel of Thomas* and Tatian's *Diatessaron*, and having published widely in this field. It is no surprise, then, that he adroitly plots a secure course between the extremes of conservative and liberal scholarship. He demonstrates that the early church was neither a single monolithic unity (as conservatives sometimes assume) nor a diverse and disunited array of competing factions devoid of a common core (as Ehrman asserts). The evidence points, rather, to unity in diversity across the churches of the second century. Despite their many differences, the churches shared a common understanding of the faith, and a growing consensus that the four Gospels we know from the NT were the most ancient, authoritative and reliable sources for Jesus. In contrast, the non-canonical Gospels, such as *Thomas* and *Judas*, were all written later than the NT Gospels, and reflect a Gnostic worldview very different from the one common to apostolic Christianity. In particular, the non-canonical Gospels generally display an aversion to the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation and bodily resurrection, preferring a de-Judaized 'spiritual' Jesus who is detached from, and therefore largely irrelevant to, worldly affairs. For this reason, despite their contemporary popularity, Perrin is correct to conclude that the Gnostic Gospels are of almost negligible significance for serious research on the historical Jesus (though they do, of course, tell us a great deal about Gnosticism!).

Perrin's most pointed critique of the common liberal reliance on the non-canonical Gospels, however, is his observation that the Jesus of the canonical Gospels is more demanding than the Jesus of Gnostic imagination. An overly spiritualized Gnostic Jesus, he says, is inherently attractive to those who wish to bear the name Christian while also remaining on the world's 'inside track' (pp. 160-61). In contrast, the emphasis of the canonical Gospels on the human nature of Jesus, on the Jewish focus of his mission, and on his vindication by bodily resurrection after his rejection by the powerbrokers of his day, is all inherently subversive. God's entry into his world in the body of this One, and God's resurrection of that same One after his suffering and death, is deeply significant. The incarnation and resurrection simultaneously affirms the goodness of the created order, and challenge all human ideologies and power structures which - by making absolutist claims to authority - arrogate to themselves prerogatives that rightly belong to the Creator alone. It is the very challenging nature of the Jesus of the NT, Perrin provocatively suggests, that explains the aversion to him in some quarters.

In Chapter 11 Perrin completes his treatment of the reliability and authority of the canonical Gospels with a brief discussion of the nature of the translations we have in our printed English editions of the Bible. By use of a humorous anecdote about 'International Pi Day' (of all things!), he makes the point that, although English translations can only ever offer an approximate rendition of the words spoken by Jesus, they nevertheless provide a faithful record of his teaching. When we read the Gospels we hear Jesus speaking to us in our mother tongue. More precision is always possible by recourse to the original languages, but quibbles about translations should not be allowed to distract us from responding to the one who calls for our absolute allegiance.

Perrin concludes his work in the final chapter by completing the story of his own surrender to Jesus. This personal narrative allows him to make explicit a challenge that is implicit throughout the book: if the Gospel writers faithfully recorded the life of Jesus, if this record was reliably transmitted in the manuscript traditions, if our translations give us adequate access to Jesus in words we can understand, and if we still refuse to give Jesus the place in our lives that he demands and deserves, then the problem is not with the transmission, but with our wills.

This is a powerful and engaging book. It interacts with the best of recent scholarship, and yet avoids an overemphasis on technicalities so that any educated person will find it eminently readable. It is theologically sophisticated, and yet Perrin's extended personal anecdotes and eschewal of jargon make it easily accessible for people with little or no exposure to theological discourse. It offers sound arguments, without getting bogged down in details, and repeatedly shows the contemporary relevance

of the material considered, without losing focus on the reliability of the Gospels, which is its primary concern. Perhaps most significantly, Perrin's repeated emphasis on the doctrines of creation, incarnation and bodily resurrection, on Jesus' Jewish context, and on the nature of Scripture as both divine and human, engenders a remarkably robust vision of the Christian faith. This vision can acknowledge the messiness and complexity of meeting Jesus in the Gospels, without either burying its head in the sand (as if the difficulties do not exist), or claiming too much (as if every detail of the life of Jesus can be known with mathematical certainty). Perrin is surely right that these common conservative strategies will not do. At the same time, the robust vision of the Christian faith he presents is also sharp enough to see through the messiness of history, to reject the claim that the truth has been 'lost in transmission' (a common liberal move), and to embrace the One who came in the flesh. The book therefore offers a much needed antidote to the residual Gnosticism of much liberal scholarship, as well as a salutary corrective to the anti-intellectualism and/or overstated confidence prevalent in some conservative circles.

If the book has a weakness, it is that - despite Perrin's stated aim to address both Christians and non-Christians - he probably asks a little too much of even a motivated non-Christian reader. Nevertheless, the book admirably does the job of engendering robust Christian faith in the face of scepticism, and will provide interested Christians with valuable fodder when the question of the latest Gnostic Gospel comes up at the coffee cart. Highly recommended.

Murray Smith

is a PhD candidate in the Ancient History Department at Macquarie University, working on 'The Logic of Second Coming in Earliest Christianity'. He lectures on Jesus and the Gospels at the Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, and is also on the leadership team at Kirkplace (Kogarah Presbyterian Church).