

Machen

[Christianity] transformed the lives of men not by appealing to the human will, but by telling a story; not by exhortation, but by the narration of an event.

[Christianity and Liberalism, 47-48]

Salvation then, according to the Bible, is not something that was discovered, but something that happened. Hence appears the uniqueness of the Bible. All the ideas of Christianity might be discovered in some other religion, yet there would be in that other religion no Christianity. For Christianity depends, not upon a complex of ideas, but upon the narration of an event.

[Christianity and Liberalism, 70]

Bennema

By “narrative,” I mean those literary works that contain a story and a storyteller ... I use *narrative* to refer to any literary work (fiction and nonfiction) in both ancient and modern times. In adapted form, then, the term *character* refers to “a human actor, individual or collective, imaginary or real, who plays a role in the story of a literary narrative.” While characters may resemble people, they only exist within the story world of the text (even when they represent real people in the real world).

[A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative, 28-29]

Machen

But at this point a fatal error lies in wait. It is one of the root errors of modern liberalism. Christian experience, we have just said, is useful as confirming the gospel message. But because it is necessary, many men have jumped to the conclusion that it is all that is necessary. Having a present experience of Christ in the heart, may we not, it is said, hold that experience no matter what history may tell us as to the events of the first Easter morning? May we not make ourselves altogether independent of the results of Biblical criticism? No matter what sort of man history may tell us Jesus of Nazareth actually was, no matter what history may say about the real meaning of His death or about the story of His alleged resurrection, may we not continue to experience the presence of Christ in our souls?

[Christianity and Liberalism, 71]

Bennema

The authors [of the Gospels] may have used literary ‘creativity’ but what matters is that the reader does not disbelieve their credibility. As Merenlahti and Hakola explain, while not everything in non-fictional narratives is necessarily historical, this does not make them fictional narratives since they do claim to describe the

real world; what counts is that the reader does not doubt the author's explicit or implicit truth claims.

*[A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character, 45
A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative, 65
The Historical Reliability, 20]*

Sternberg argues similarly for the Hebrew Bible as historiography: 'history-writing is not a record of fact—of what “really happened”—but a discourse that claims to be a record of fact. Nor is fiction-writing a tissue of free inventions but a discourse that claims freedom of invention. The antithesis lies not in the presence or absence of truth value but of the commitment to truth value'.

[A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character, 45]

[W]e will not attempt to reconstruct a 'historical' account in a strict sense ... John's aim in retelling the dialogue between Jesus and, for example, Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman, was to persuade and convince his readers not of certain historical facts but of their significance and theological truths.

[The Power of Saving Wisdom, 16]

Machen

The trouble is that the experience thus maintained is not Christian experience. Religious experience it may be, but Christian experience it certainly is not. For Christian experience depends absolutely upon an event. ... Christian experience is rightly used when it confirms the documentary evidence. But it can never possibly provide a substitute for the documentary evidence. We know that the gospel story is true partly because of the early date of the documents in which it appears, the evidence as to their authorship ...

[Christianity and Liberalism, 71-72]

Bennema

I will use “Mark,” “John,” and “Luke” to refer to the authors of the works, which is not a claim about their historical identity.

[A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative, 28]

Although we remain agnostic whether the gospel and the epistles of John have common authorship (an author we call 'John'), the similarities in language, style and theology suggest that they at least belong to the same school of thought.

[Christ, the Spirit, 108]

The book of Revelation, perhaps not written by John himself but certainly standing in the same tradition

[Excavating John's Gospel, 61]

I contend that the Beloved Disciple is a real historical character, one of the Twelve, but not [*sic*] the author [of the Gospel of John]. It is possible that the author has 'idealized' this person to function as an example of an ideal witness/disciple.

[Excavating John's Gospel, 145]

We contend that the author of this gospel [of John] is the Beloved Disciple, whom we tentatively identify as John the son of Zebedee ... we suggest that the external evidence allows for the possibility that the Beloved Disciple is either John the son of Zebedee or John the Elder, but that the internal evidence favours an identification with the former ... The identity of the Beloved Disciple remains a debatable (and perhaps irresolvable) issue. Although we tentatively propose that John of Zebedee is the most likely candidate, John the Elder is a serious contender.

[*Encountering Jesus*, 1, 180-181]

[T]he identity of the Beloved Disciple remains a debatable (and perhaps irresolvable) issue ... I propose that John of Zebedee is the most likely candidate, John the Elder is a serious contender.

[*The Historical Reliability*, 15]

Machen

Christian experience is rightly used when it helps to convince us that the events narrated in the New Testament actually did occur; but it can never enable us to be Christians whether the events occurred or not.

[*Christianity and Liberalism*, 72]

Bennema

Whether it is necessary (in order to accept the truth claim of John 3) that Nicodemus existed, or whether it is necessary that his conversation with Jesus took place exactly as has been recorded is perhaps more ambivalent. Nevertheless, even if historical facts cannot be reconstructed any more, we still require a kind of narrative plausibility: for example, we prefer to see some historical reality behind the Nicodemus story, in that it must be plausible that such a conversation could have taken place. In our understanding, the Fourth Gospel moves along a spectrum of a mixture of (what we would call) 'history' and 'fiction', in which the stories about Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, for example, perhaps contain more fiction than the passion narrative in John 18-19. ... The *genre* of the Fourth Gospel is probably that of the Graeco-Roman βίος ... it does not necessarily need to be historically accurate in all its detail; it may be a mixture of historical accuracy and fictional imagination in its witness to the T/truth. This is not to deny a historical substratum to the Fourth Gospel, but the question of how much is historical need not dominate the debate concerning to what extent the Fourth Gospel is true.

[*The Power of Saving Wisdom*, 16, 105-106]

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exactly as has been recorded is perhaps a more ambivalent issue.

[Excavating John's Gospel, 8]

... we must clarify the nature of the narrative material in the New Testament and the implications for our approach to character. How would reading the narratives in the Gospels as fiction, nonfiction, or even a mixture of both, impinge on the reconstruction of character? For example, does it matter, for the reconstruction of his character, whether Nicodemus was a historical person or a fictitious character?

[A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative, 62-63]

Machen

The narration of the facts is history

[Christianity and Liberalism, 29]

Bennema

The fact that Nicodemus features elsewhere in the narrative (7:52; 19:39) does not “prove” the historicity of Nicodemus.

[The Historical Reliability, 7]

[W]e must use critical tools such as historical criticism to arrive at an informed understanding of the New Testament.

[The Historical Reliability, 19]

Machen

The contents of the Bible, then, are unique. But another fact about the Bible is also important. The Bible might contain an account of a true revelation from God, and yet the account be full of error. Before the full authority of the Bible can be established, therefore, it is necessary to add to the Christian doctrine of revelation the Christian doctrine of inspiration. The latter doctrine means that the Bible not only is an account of important things, but that the account itself is true, the writers having been so preserved from error, despite a full maintenance of their habits of thought and expression, that the resulting Book is the “infallible rule of faith and practice.”

[Christianity and Liberalism, 72-73]

Bennema

If the Gospels belong to the genre of the ancient Graeco-Roman biography (as many scholars contend today), they need not be historically accurate in every detail.

*[A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character, 45
Encountering Jesus, 13]*

[T]he *dramatis personae* in the Johannine story are also composites of real historical people ... the historicity of the characters in John's Gospel does not exclude the possibility that the author used a legitimate degree of artistic freedom to portray his characters.

[A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character, 43, 45]

[T]he *dramatis personae* are composites of historical people

[*The Historical Reliability*, 19]

Regarding the historical referent of Nicodemus, Richard Baukham presents ...

[*A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative*, 148]

Let us be clear, invention or fiction need not have connotations of being untrue or erroneous.

[*The Historical Reliability*, 6]

Machen

This doctrine of “plenary inspiration” has been made the subject of persistent misrepresentation. Its opponents speak of it as though it involved a mechanical theory of the activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, it is said, is represented in this doctrine as dictating the Bible to writers who were really little more than stenographers.

[*Christianity and Liberalism*, 73]

Bennema

If the Gospels belong to the genre of the ancient Greco-Roman biography, as many scholars contend today, they need not be viewed as “objective, factual” accounts akin to courtroom transcripts.

[*The Historical Reliability*, 20]

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[*A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative*, 65]

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[*Character Reconstruction*, 4-5]

Machen

But of course all such caricatures are without basis in fact, and it is rather surprising that intelligent men should be so blinded by prejudice about this matter as not even to examine for themselves the perfectly accessible treatises in which the doctrine of plenary inspiration is set forth. It is usually considered good practice to examine a thing for one’s self before echoing the vulgar ridicule of it. But in connection with the Bible, such scholarly restraints are somehow regarded as out of place. It is so much easier to content one’s self with a few opprobrious adjectives such as “mechanical,” or the like. Why engage in serious criticism when the people prefer ridicule?

[*Christianity and Liberalism*, 73]

Bennema

[W]e cannot naïvely assume that the Gospel of John is a straightforward factual record of historical events.

[*The Historical Reliability*, 6]

Unless we want to put our minds in the dogmatic sand ...

[*The Historical Reliability*, 8]

... being naïvely or rigidly dogmatic ...

[*The Historical Reliability*, 8]

Machen

Why attack a real opponent when it is easier to knock down a man of straw?

[*Christianity and Liberalism*, 73]

Bennema

In fact, no serious scholar claims that the Gospels contain the *ipsissima verba Jesu*.

[*A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character*, 45]

Machen

As a matter of fact, the doctrine of plenary inspiration does not deny the individuality of the Biblical writers; it does not ignore their use of ordinary means for acquiring information; it does not involve any lack of interest in the historical situations which gave rise to the Biblical books. What it does deny is the presence of error in the Bible. It supposes that the Holy Spirit so informed the minds of the Biblical writers that they were kept from falling into the errors that mar all other books. The Bible might contain an account of a genuine revelation of God, and yet not contain a true account. But according to the doctrine of inspiration, the account is as a matter of fact a true account; the Bible is an “infallible rule of faith and practice.”

[*Christianity and Liberalism*, 74]

Bennema

Thus, *eyewitness testimony*, not oral tradition, should be our principal model to discover how the Jesus traditions reached the Gospel writers.

[*The Historical Reliability*, 12]

[T]he author [of the Fourth Gospel] did not produce a strict historical record ... I intentionally used “fiction” as the opposite of “history” in order to position John’s Gospel somewhere on that spectrum.

[*The Historical Reliability*, 8]

“Historical reliability” does not necessarily imply an objective factual recording of the events as they really happened ... the Gospel of John is historically reliable to the extent that it faithfully testifies to the things Jesus said and did, *and* their significance.

[*The Historical Reliability*, 9]

John may have ‘fictionalized’ or embellished aspects of his characters by leaving out, changing or adding certain details

*[A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character, 45
Encountering Jesus, 13]*

The New Testament authors may have left out, changed, or added certain details

[Character Reconstruction, 4]

The so-called Beloved Disciple was either as perfect as this Gospel portrays him or may have been somewhat ‘idealized’.

[A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character, 45]

The so-called Beloved Disciple may well have been as perfect as this Gospel portrays him or could have been somewhat “idealized.”

[A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative, 65]

[Dale Martin] does not mention that there is a growing scholarly consensus (rooted in Richard Burridge’s work) that the Gospels are ancient biographies, where persuasion and plausibility were more important than “factual accuracy” and where the line between what we would call “fact” and “fiction” is somewhat blurred.

[Review of Martin: New Testament History, 4]

Assuming the priority of Mark’s Gospel, it is interesting that while Matthew and Luke altered or deviated from Mark, the Johannine author (who, in my view, also knew Mark) significantly expands on Mark’s account

[The Character of Pilate, 251]

We will see that at times John’s information concurs with what we know about these characters from the Markan narrative, but at other times, John’s information complements or even deviates from that of Mark.

[A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative, 133]

We shall see in our sample study of Jesus’ mother that the Johannine narrative partly fits with what we know about her from the Markan narrative but that John also supplies information that complements and even deviates from that of Mark.

[Character Reconstruction, 6]

Machen

But too often the preacher desires to avoid the delicate question of errors in the Bible—a question which might give offence to the rank and file—and prefers to speak merely against “mechanical” theories of inspiration, the theory of “dictation,” the “superstitious use of the Bible as a talisman,” or the like. It all sounds to the plain man as though it were very harmless. Does not the liberal preacher say that the Bible is “divine”?

[Christianity and Liberalism, 74]

Bennema

Peter and Paul, by virtue of being spokespersons of the divine, are ...

[Character Reconstruction, 8]

I suggest it is fair to say that a good case can be made that the Gospel of John is a trustworthy account of Jesus' life and ministry according to the literary conventions of that time.

[*The Historical Reliability*, 24-25]

Machen

By the equivocal use of traditional phrases ...

[*Christianity and Liberalism*, 177]

Bennema

... would there not arguably be a fictitious element to it?

[*The Historical Reliability*, 8]

... they would not have created fictitious characters.

[*The Historical Reliability*, 20]

Machen

A terrible crisis unquestionably has arisen in the Church. In the ministry of evangelical churches are to be found hosts of those who reject the gospel of Christ ... entrance into the Church was secured for those who are hostile to the very foundations of the faith.

[*Christianity and Liberalism*, 177]

Bennema

In line with our discussion about the kind of reader I assume (see section 3.1), a reader of Mark's Gospel knows the Old Testament, a reader of John's Gospel knows the Old Testament and the Markan narrative, and a reader of Acts will be familiar with the Old Testament, Mark, Luke, and either Matthew or Q.

[*A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative*, 113]

Machen

And now there are some indications that the fiction of conformity to the past is to be thrown off, and the real meaning of what has been taking place is to be allowed to appear.

[*Christianity and Liberalism*, 178]

Bennema

Cornelis Bennema, Union School of Theology, Bridgend
Cornelis Bennema is Senior Lecturer in New Testament at Union School of Theology, UK

[*Character Reconstruction*, forthcoming in *Expository Times* (2016)]

Machen

What is today matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires.

[*Christianity and Culture*, 7]