

AUTHENTICITY and AUTHORITY

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The term ‘authenticate’ means (1) to show that an item is genuine, i.e. that it has its origin in the person it claims to be its author or producer. To establish this connection is an historical task. A play is authentic Shakespeare if Shakespeare wrote it. A painting is authentic Vermeer if Vermeer painted it.

To show that a writing or a painting is authentic, i.e. coming from its purported source, is an historical task. To accomplish this one appeals to the available and relevant historical evidence. Whether this painting is genuine Vermeer or not is settled by examining the evidence. But an examination of the evidence may lead to a false conclusion. But whether the historical judgment is true or false, it makes no difference to the aesthetic value of the work.

Pursue the analogy for a moment. If a work of art is beautiful and evokes a positive aesthetic response, comparable to that of an original and authentic production then, *aesthetically*, it does not matter who painted it. It is beautiful and it evokes response. That it is not ‘original’ in the sense of ‘attributable to the purported source’ does not matter. Originality value is often thought of as relic value. This, it is thought, can be established by historical investigation, where the evidence is available. Such value has nothing to do with aesthetic judgment.

The term *authenticate* also means (2) ‘shows itself by the response it evokes to be a worthy composition, a worthy artefact.’ Such a work authenticates itself by evoking an aesthetic response. Such evocation does not depend upon the historical authenticity of the work. Such aesthetic value, and so such authenticity, is independent of historical knowledge about who originated the work. Authenticity in sense (1), with its opposite forgery, fake, is historical. Authenticity, in sense (2), as (in the case of art) aesthetic value, is not historical.

Now we turn to Scripture. The concept of authenticity as referring to the authorship of a book is an historical concept. The concept of authenticity as referring to the religious authority of the Bible is not historical. The authority, as for example, applied to the Bible, is independent of the historical evidence relating to the author of the book. That is authenticated by historical research. The other (so to speak) authenticates itself by what it does, i.e. in its functioning in the life of the community and in evoking appropriate responses. That this is so is the justification for using the notion of ‘self-authentication.’ It has reference to the influence the book has in the community in which it is recognised. Whoever produced the book, the book has influence of the appropriate kind in the community of faith.

This is an important second meaning of the term ‘authentic’. If it is a fact, if it can be established by examining historical sources that the writing has been accepted and that this acceptance constitutes its continuing status in the community, then that writing is shown to be authentic .

This is the case even if the real or even probable author of the writing cannot be so established. What we bear in mind is that some scriptural books did not come into being as modern books do, with a single author working away on a manuscript until satisfied that it is ready for publication. Stories circulated about the figure of Jesus after his death, were passed around and took different forms in different sections of the Christian community before they were committed to writing. The process allowed for borrowing, for adjustments as the different traditions about Jesus were circulated. The eventual version of a New Testament 'book' could then be attributed to a particular figure, or its authorship story be forgotten. An early Christian writer in the third century acknowledged this. He commented, 'Who wrote the book of Hebrews, God alone knows'. So speculations could then arise about its authorship. The book of Hebrews was, after some consideration leading to its acceptance, included in the New Testament canon.

The fact that the writing was accepted and continued being accepted was the criterion for its becoming and remaining an authority in the church. To this was added the idea that to establish the authority of the writings one must be able to connect the writings with an apostle. That was, in some circles, the most important consideration. This took for granted that it was possible to define 'apostolicity', and also that by connecting a writing with an apostle or someone closely associated with an apostle, that established that writing as having unique authority. This is worth further discussion. For it gave rise to the questionable idea of 'apostolic succession' which insisted that the successors of the apostles, with positions of authority in the developed community, inherited and retained the authority that the apostolic authors had. So arose the discussion between the advocates of Scripture and advocates of tradition concerning the primary authority within the church.