Goodenough on the Beginnings of Christianity

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The Editor, with Casey’s hearty approval, has offered to let me reply to this critique of my article, but what I have to say will take little space. The three "errors of fact" need no comment, and all that really is left is the basic issue of methodology. The question is whether we are to stick exclusively to the old "documentary" procedure, or go the slight distance I do in form criticism.

Just what he means by the "documentary theory" Casey does not say, but his remarks imply that he thinks Mk, and presumably Q, sprang fully formed from their author’s minds with no developments of consequence between the events themselves and their being recounted in one of these documents. The authors of Lk and Mt seem to have used Mk and Q as documents, plus a lot more material which likewise was without history between the events recorded and their inclusion in these new Gospels. Jn was similarly the product of documents plus a man making a new document, with similar access, apparently, to material which had existed in vacuo until he put it into his gospel. Casey admits the existence, to be sure, of oral traditions and of some lost documents. But these had authors he says, and so we are moving from the known documents to the unknown when we go back to them from the gospels and authors we already have. Casey would explain the known by the known and not get into the perplexity of this unknown background, this "fog of unverifiable conjecture." He finds it "simpler" to do this than to try to peer into the forever lost vicissitudes of oral tradition. To me that is the simplicity of solving an equation by ignoring one of its variables. That the authors of Lk and Mt had no
knowledge of the events they tell except as they had them in Mk, had never heard of the feeding of the five thousand, for example, or the anointing of Jesus until they read the stories in Mk; or that, if they had heard such stories, they ignored what they had heard completely in editing Mk; this seems a very simple theory indeed.

I see, however, nothing in the issue to debate. The reader must conclude for himself whether by trying the impossible – the reconstruction of the tradition – he will supplement (not replace) the great achievements of documentary criticism, or will prefer to go on with Casey trying (with equal lack of proof) to explain the known by the known. Comparison of my reconstruction of the story of the anointing with Casey's is illuminating.

A few details are worth noting. In the paragraph where he quotes a sentence from me and then goes on to make whimsical parallels about oral traditions of George Washington he has not read me carefully. In the quotation itself I deny that oral tradition would account for the juxtaposition of the stories of the feeding and the crossing of the lake. In addition, at the bottom of the same page and over on the next (pages 39-40 above) I say that a written source is necessary, but is more likely to have been a document on which both Mk and Jn drew than a case of Jn's borrowing from Mk. I may be right or wrong here, but Casey is here rebutting something I myself specifically deny.

My section on the eucharist is, I admit, most unsatisfactory. Casey says I have not "considered this question: why did the Christians in this early meal find themselves 'partaking of Jesus Christ in the blessed elements'? What made the elements 'blessed'," Casey asks, "and the communicants think they were 'partaking'?" This remark would have been quite justified if Casey had said I had not "answered" the question rather than not "considered" it. The answer is to be found in traces of Jewish sacramental and Messianic meals whose evidence I have long been considering, but said in this article I should have to present at greater length elsewhere. I can here only assure Casey that I am indeed "considering" it.