

## The gospels: fact or fiction?

*‘The fact that something is written down is persuasive to people not used to asking questions like: “Who wrote it, and when?” “How did they know what to write?” “Did they, in their time, really mean what we in our time, understand them to be saying?” “Were they unbiased observers, or did they have an agenda that coloured their writing?”’<sup>1</sup>*

### **Do we have what was actually written by the New Testament authors?**

#### Some comparisons from history

- Josephus *Jewish War*  
A history in Greek from an Aramaic first draft, written soon after 70 AD, very like the gospels.  
Survival: 2 collections of excerpts and 9 complete manuscripts. Oldest is a fifth century Latin translation.  
The earliest of the other eight (all in Greek) is tenth century.
- Tacitus *Annals of Imperial Rome*  
Survival: 1 manuscript for Annals 1-6, none for Annals 7-10, one for Annals 11-16.  
Neither manuscript earlier than the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>
- The New Testament

Thousands of manuscripts or fragments from all over the ancient world. (5000+) This means variations can be resolved to discover the original in the vast majority of significant cases. Mark 5:1 is a typical example - we cannot be sure of a place name. Mark 16 is the most significant example – most of this resurrection account is probably a second century addition but the source for the doubtful verses is clearly the other gospels so no part of the Christian claim depends on the reliability of those verses in Mark.

Examples of copies still surviving:

- c.350 AD Codex Vaticanus (in Rome) - Whole NT (except 2nd half of Heb. and beyond)
- Codex Sinaiticus (British Museum) - Whole NT and OT
- c. 250 AD Chester Beatty Papyri (Dublin) - Most of NT (Incl. all 4 gospels but with large gaps)
- c. 200AD p<sup>32</sup> p<sup>46</sup> p<sup>64</sup> p<sup>66</sup> (Various places) - Parts of the gospels and Paul’s letters.
- c. 125 AD P<sup>52</sup> (John Rylands Library, Manchester) - John 18:31-33,37f

New Testament as we know it is quoted in many ancient documents of early date, e.g.

- 96 AD Clement of Rome
- c. 120 AD Polycarp’s Letter to the Philippians
- 120-130 AD Valentius writes heretical book, ‘The gospel of truth’

### **Could the writers have known the truth?**

|                         |            |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Jesus born              | c.4 BC     |
| Jesus’s public ministry | c.28-33 AD |
| Paul’s letters          | 48-60      |
| Mark                    | c.65       |
| Luke & Acts             | 80-85      |
| Matthew                 | 85-90      |

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<sup>1</sup> p. 92 Dawkins, Richard *The God Delusion* (Bantam, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> p.45 Barnett, Paul *Is the New Testament History?* (Paternoster, 1998)

- The gap from Jesus's death to the writings ranges from only 15 to 67 years. In other words within the lifetime of those who knew Jesus.
- The writers claimed to be eyewitnesses or to have recorded the words of eyewitnesses:
  - John 21:24 - referring to a key character in the gospel ('the disciple whom Jesus loved') says 'This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.'
  - Luke 1:1-4 - 'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.'
  - 1 Corinthians 15:4-8 (55-56 AD) - '[Jesus] was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also.'
  - Papias (writes c.130) preserved in Eusebius (265-340) 'Mark, indeed, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, howbeit not in order, all that he recalled of what was either said or done by the Lord.'<sup>3</sup>

- They based their writing on earlier oral collections and probably written collections:

Translated back into Aramaic much of Jesus's teaching falls into rhythmic and rhyming verse. This would have been easy to learn, and the job of the good Rabbi was to help his disciples memorise his teaching.

Papias on Matthew 'Matthew compiled the oracles in the Hebrew language; but everyone interpreted [or translated] them as he was able.'<sup>4</sup> This looks like an earlier part-gospel in Aramaic.

Source criticism evidence for sources behind Matthew and Luke ('Q', 'M', 'L')

Evidence from other groups that disciples took notes of their Rabbi's teaching as he spoke.

### **Do we have reason to trust them?**

- Their aims:

Luke 1:4 'so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.'

John 20:30-31 'Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'

They did not aim to create a body of moral teaching backed up by some invented miracle stories, they aimed to give us their eyewitness account of the facts.

Acts 1:21-22 (choosing a new apostle) 'Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.'

<sup>3</sup>Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* III.39.15, p. 49 J. Stevenson and W.H.C. Frend *A New Eusebius* (SPCK, 1999)

<sup>4</sup>ibid. III.39.16

Acts 2:32 'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.'

Acts 3:15 'You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.'  
cf. Acts 5:32; 10:39-43

- Who they were:

A mix of fisherman, tax-collector, and highly educated Pharisee. They wrote their books in different parts of the ancient world for different audiences yet their accounts agree and corroborate each other.

The story they circulated about Jesus brought them stoning, imprisonment, flogging and more (2 Corinthians 11:21-33) yet they stuck to it.

- Their audience:

Other Christians who remembered the events well and could correct them, and yet very soon saw the apostles' writings as of equal importance with the Old Testament.

John 21:24 'We know that his testimony is true.'

2 Peter 3:16 '[Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, *as they do the other Scriptures*, to their own destruction.'

Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and beyond who also remembered the events well and wished to discredit them.

Matthew 28:11-15 'While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.'

It is striking that the chief priests couldn't argue with the known fact of the empty tomb so they had to invent another explanation.

Acts 2:22 'Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, *as you yourselves know*.'

### **Can we corroborate their account?**

- The existence of the early church.

In Herculaneum and Pompeii (both destroyed by Vesuvius August 79 AD) we find fish symbols, a cross carved into wood and two of our seven 'ROTAS SATOR' squares (acrostics about Christ) Cornelius Tacitus (Roman historian born c. 53 AD, writing c. 115 AD) writes this about the great fire of Rome in 64 AD

'Consequently, to get rid of the report, [that he had ordered the fire] Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of

the evil, but also in the City.’<sup>5</sup> (cf. Lk. 3:1; Mt. 27:2; Acts 3:13;13:28; Lk. 23:1-2; Acts 1:8;28:14,30-31)

C. Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Younger) in 112 AD wrote to the emperor Trajan from Bithynia in Asia Minor because he had problems with too many Christians ‘it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as a god;’ and ‘many of all ages and every rank, and also of both sexes are brought into present or future danger. The contagion of that superstition has penetrated not the cities only, but the villages and country; yet it seems possible to stop it and set it right. At any rate it is certain enough that the almost deserted temples begin to be resorted to....’<sup>6</sup> (cf. Acts 20:7;19:23-27)

The church reported here is the one we find in the NT but this is too early for myths about Jesus to have taken hold.

- Jewish testimony to Christ

Synagogue prayer 80s AD ‘[may] the Nazarenes and the minim perish as in a moment and be blotted out from the book of life’<sup>7</sup> The Talmud (Jewish law code) usually uses these words to mean Christians and adds other references about Jesus including that he practised magic, said he had come not to destroy the law but to add to it, and that he was hanged on Passover eve for heresy.<sup>8</sup>

Josephus, Jewish general and historian, born 37AD, writes in Rome after the fall of Jerusalem. Corroboration for Acts 5:37 in *War* ii.8, Acts 11:28 in *Antiquities* xx.2.5, Acts 12:19-23 in *Antiquities* xix.8.2, John the Baptist in *Antiquities* xviii.5.2 and James in *Antiquities* xx.9.1<sup>9</sup>

Most striking is *Antiquities* xviii.3.3 This passage is disputed by some, particularly the words I have in italics, on the grounds that a non-Christian was unlikely to write them. But the words are in all the manuscripts, have the characteristic diction of Josephus, and fit with the reference to James later as ‘the brother of the Jesus who was called Christ’ (xx.9.1 as above) which suggests he has already mentioned Jesus. Perhaps he intends to be sarcastic.

‘About that time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. *On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him*. And the tribe of the Christians so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.’<sup>10</sup>

- Gentile testimony to Christ (and see Pliny and Tacitus above)

Julius Africanus (a Christian writer of 221 AD) quotes Thallus (a very non-Christian writer of c. 52 AD) ‘Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness [at the crucifixion] as an eclipse of the sun - unreasonably, as it seems to me.’ By 52 AD the gospel story was being written against by Romans.

Suetonius c.120 AD ‘Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and wicked superstition.’ and ‘Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of

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<sup>5</sup>Tacitus *Annals* xv.44.3-4, p. 2 of *A New Eusebius*

<sup>6</sup>Pliny *Ep.* x.96.7,9-10, p. 19 of *A New Eusebius*

<sup>7</sup>*Benediction 12*, p.25 of Barnett, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup>paraphrase of p. 101 of Bruce, FF *The New Testament Documents. Are they reliable?* (IVP, 1992)

<sup>9</sup>of these only *Antiquities* xx.9.1 is in *A New Eusebius*, p. 1

<sup>10</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.3.3, p. 28 of Barnett, op. cit.

Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome...'<sup>11</sup> In Acts 18:2,3 Paul meets Jews recently expelled by Claudius.

Garbled but real testimony that backs up the bones of the story recorded in the gospels.

- Archaeology (and see Herculaneum and Pompeii above)

All sorts of scraps of corroboration e.g.

Pool of Bethesda John 5:2 (once thought to be a classic case of John inventing locations) found in 1888 and referred to in Qumran.

Romans 16:23 'Erastus the city treasurer greets you.' 1929 in Corinth (where Paul wrote Romans) an inscription was found on a first century pavement 'ERASTVS PRO:AED:S:P:STRAVIT' (Erastus, curator of public buildings, laid this pavement at his own expense.)

Pottery and scraps of document found on Egyptian tips covered in the kind of Greek the NT was written in. They weren't writing the 'wrong' Greek because they were inventing it later (as had been said) but they were writing in the language of everyday business and life.

- Historical detail

Luke in particular leaves himself open to checks on his accuracy. e.g. Lk. 2:1-3;3:1-2; Acts 18:2 And he passes the test, for example he was thought to be wrong in Lk. 3:1 'Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene.' Attacked because the only Lysanias of Abilene we knew of was a king who was executed in 34 BC. Then an inscription was found on a temple, 'for the salvation of the Lords Imperial [ruling 14-29 AD] and their whole household, by Nymphaeus, a freedman of Lysanias the tetrarch.' Luke dates his tetrarch to 27/28 AD

Luke in Acts displays detailed knowledge, for example the shipwreck at Malta Acts 27-28, for passages where he claims to be an eyewitness and the details fit our knowledge of the period.

First century Palestinian Judaism was distinctively different from Diaspora Judaism (those living in Gentile cities around the Mediterranean). Recently Richard Bauckham (Professor of New Testament Studies at St Andrew's University) has done statistical analysis of the personal names used in the NT and compared them to the names on all the inscriptions surviving from Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism.<sup>12</sup> The NT names are significantly correlated to Palestinian Judaism. This is very significant because Palestinian Judaism as a culture ceases to exist with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. This supports both early dates for the gospels and also the existence of authentic, known eyewitnesses for the accounts of Jesus.

### **What other explanation do we have that fits this evidence?**

**We have what they wrote; they were eyewitnesses or first-hand recorders of eyewitness material; we have good reason to think them truthful; and where we can check their account, it is accurate.**

**Their record of events deserves reading as history, not as make-believe and we can come to sure conclusions about Jesus based on what they said.**

### Further reading

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<sup>11</sup>Seutonius *Life of Nero*, xvi.2 and *Life of Claudius*, xxv.4, on pages 3 and 1 of *A New Eusebius*

<sup>12</sup> Bauckham, Richard *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Eerdmans,2006) Chapter 4

Where possible I have used references from *A New Eusebius* (SPCK, 1999) J. Stevenson, revised by W.H.C. Frend

Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?* (Paternoster, 1998) is cheap, short and easy to read.

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Eerdmans, 2006) is more substantial and looks specifically at the eyewitness basis for the gospels.