

Is the New Testament Reliable?

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1

Introduction

Some topics are too complex to be dealt with in a short booklet and yet too important to be ignored.

This subject is one of them! Barely a week goes by without crackpot and sceptical theories about Jesus and early Christianity finding their way into the media. Without engaging specifically with any one of these I hope to be able to build a constructive case for believing in the reliability of the New Testament documents as sources of information about Jesus and Christian origins. I will tackle this in four stages.

- First, by way of introduction, I will pose the question ‘What is the New Testament?’ The aim will be to provide something of the ‘historical flavour’ of early Christianity and help us to move from what we, in our day, might think of as the New Testament, back into Christian antiquity.
- Secondly, I will look at the actual manuscripts of the New Testament. The fundamental question here is whether we can trust the transmission process: ‘Do we know what the authors wrote?’
- Thirdly, I will say something about the selection process, and look at some of the material that was ‘excluded’ from the canonical collection which came to be known as the New Testament, including the *Gospel of Thomas* and *Gospel of Peter*.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I will look at the internal merit of the New Testament documents, especially the gospels, and their claims to historical reliability. Here the fundamental question is whether we can trust the authors: ‘Did the authors know what they were talking about?’

Clearly, the whole discussion raises questions of fundamental importance in relation to the most basic question, ‘Is Christianity true?’ I hope, in accord with 1 Peter 3.15, to be able to point to a wide range of evidence which supports the answer ‘yes’ to such a question.

2

What is the New Testament?

Before we can really examine the reliability of the New Testament we need to be clear of the subject under discussion.

Think of your own New Testament. Most likely it is a translation of the Greek New Testament bound up together with a translation of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament. It is certain to be a printed volume, bound with a cover.

Perhaps it was given to you, or perhaps you went into a Christian bookshop and chose from the many different editions, bindings and translations which are on offer—styles of translations are available to suit all ages, tastes, levels of literacy, and even to some extent, theology. Fundamental to this enterprise, at least in the West, are the principles of consumer choice and publishers' profits. You choose the New Testament, or Bible, that you want; and the publishers make money (often large sums

Translations are available to suit all ages, tastes, levels of literacy, and even, to some extent, theology

of it) selling it to you. Indeed one of the fundamental reasons for the proliferation of English translations seems to be the desire that each publisher should have their own version to promote. (The situation is somewhat different in the two-thirds world, owing to the not-for-profit work of the United Bible Societies and Wycliffe Bible Translators).

In addition to whole Bibles, we are very familiar with the New Testament as a distinct grouping, and might often have a separate copy of the New Testament (perhaps with Psalms). Occasionally we may also come across the production of an individual book for a particular purpose, the separate printing of a gospel for evangelistic distribution, or study sheets of a Pauline epistle. Nowadays, we probably have a fairly clear idea of what makes up the New Testament, even if we cannot remember the exact order of all the books. Many of our editions offer interpretative aids to help us understand the text, perhaps a map or two at the back or a list of weights and measures in antiquity. Most editions divide the text into chapters and verses, and many include additional sub-headings or cross references

All of this is backed up by a Christian and academic publishing industry

to other relevant sections. Sometimes, of course, you have a Study Bible, with a whole commentary under the text to tell you what the Bible really says! All of this is backed up by a Christian and academic publishing industry, which is supposed to help people read the Bible and understand it better.

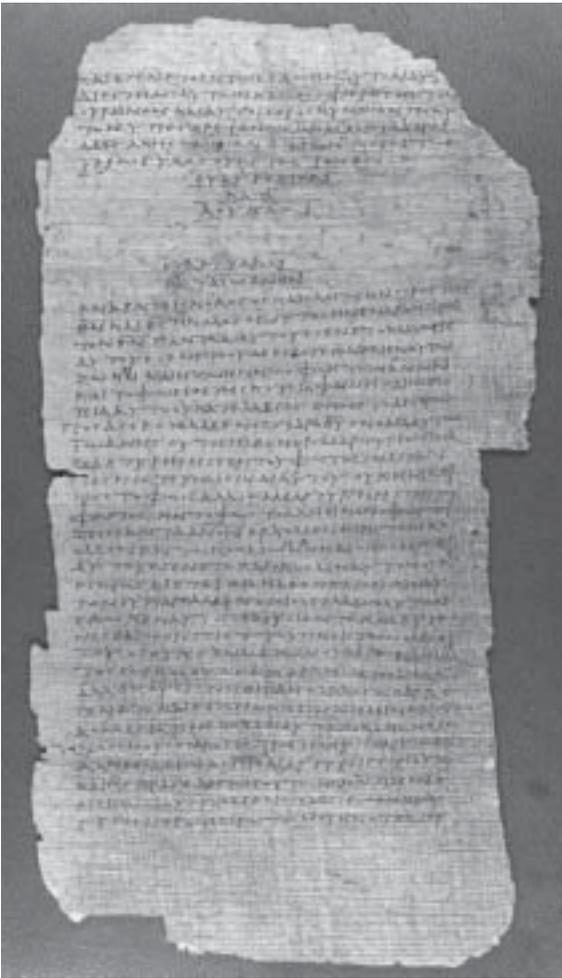
Now, it has not always been like that. Put at its most simple, in the earliest period there was no choice, no profit, no aids, and no whole collection. What we think of as the New Testament, a transportable, privately-readable edition of the definitive collection, did not really become possible until the combination of developments in printing technology and in Protestant missionary motivation arose in the eighteenth century. The first expression of this was the press founded by Karl Hildebrand Baron von Canstein in Halle in 1710 which produced over 3 million copies of the Scriptures in cheap and accessible formats.

In the earliest period there was no choice, no profit, no aids, and no whole collection

In the Beginning

In the earliest period, individual books of the New Testament would have circulated on their own. It is not known for certain when or why or by whom, but it is likely that the Pauline letters were collected together, and copied together from early in the second century onwards. The best example of this, the Chester Beatty manuscript of Paul now housed in Dublin, also known as P⁴⁵—dates from around AD 200.¹ While the four gospels came to be regarded as a conceptual unity, the fragmentary material evidence from Egypt suggests that they were most often copied individually. In terms of numbers, the gospels of Matthew and John predominate among the early fragments, presumably reflecting their popularity as apostolic writings. At this period of history you might have found a couple of the Gospels produced together, but you certainly would not have had the complete New Testament. One of the most important of the early texts—the Bodmer Papyrus of Luke and John, also known as P⁷⁵—contains substantial portions of those two gospels, but it is clear that there were no aids to help the reader understand the text, no chapter or verse divisions, and at the time the text was published perhaps 90% of the population would have been unable to read it anyway!

Of the other documents which make up the NT even less is known for certain. Collections which may have corresponded to our 'catholic epistles' (James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude) were clearly in existence in the third century, but only fragments remain.



This is a picture of the Bodmer Papyrus mentioned on the previous page. It is section XIV/XV and shows the end of Luke's gospel and the opening of John. This papyrus is held at the Bibliotheca Bodmer (the Martin Bodmer Library) in Coligny, Switzerland. It has its own website at <http://www.fondationbodmer.org/>

It is quite easy to find pictures of other papyruses on the internet, by entering 'New Testament papyrus' in any popular image search engine, such as Google. However, the commentary to be found with them can be somewhat variable!

In Christian antiquity you did not have a lot of choice. There were no Christian bookshops, and very often the production of Bibles would have depended on the use of existing materials, perhaps writing on the back of earlier manuscripts or scraps. In the period between 200–300, and beyond, the New Testament existed in smaller units—the four gospels or the Pauline letters—and not as a complete text. In the earliest Christian period, of course, certainly before 200 AD, if you had asked a Christian what he understood by the 'new testament,' he would not have answered in terms of a *document*. He would have spoken of the *new covenant* that was inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.² Only after about AD 200 does the term start to be used as a description of a collection of documents.

The situation changes in the fourth and fifth centuries, after the conversion of Constantine, and with an increasingly influential and wealthy church. In this period alone we have evidence for the production of a number of complete Greek Bibles, comprising an Old Testament and a New Testament, both in Greek. There are four famous manuscripts of the whole Greek Bible:

- *Codex Sinaiticus*, now in the British Library in London;
- *Codex Vaticanus*, now in the Vatican Library;
- *Codex Alexandrinus*, also in London;
- a manuscript in Paris called *Ephraimi Rescriptus* where the original Bible text was scrubbed out in the twelfth century and the parchment used again.

These manuscripts, although not followed in all their particulars, form the foundation of modern editions of the Greek Old Testament and Greek New Testament. The time of their production was also the period of time when clear-cut definitions of the limits of the canon collection were propounded.

Nevertheless, even this era of confidence and the flourishing of the sort of book-technology which was required for the production of these great Bibles, does not mean that complete Bibles, or even New Testaments, became the norm. Indeed, very few of the remaining manuscripts are complete New Testaments. It is sometimes claimed that there are five thousand manuscripts of the Greek New Testament but it would be more accurate to say that there are five thousand manuscripts with *portions* of the New Testament. Less than fifty were ever complete New Testaments (and of those only a very small minority remain complete today).

Questions to Ponder

- 1 Check the Bible that you use regularly. Who produced it? What does this company do with the profits?
- 2 Compare the photograph of the manuscript opposite with a page of your own Bible: what is similar and what is different?
- 3 What does 'New Testament' mean? Is it appropriate to use it of a collection of books?
- 4 Imagine that if you wanted to have any books of the Bible you had to copy them out yourself by hand. Which are the first five books you would copy?

3

Is the New Testament Text Reliable?

I would now like to look at the reliability of the documents in the sense of the quality and number of the manuscripts.

I have already mentioned some of the issues relating to the existence of manuscripts of the New Testament in *Greek*. The New Testament was translated, very rapidly, into a number of languages including Syriac, Coptic, and Latin (and there are more than eight thousand manuscripts of portions of the New Testament in the *Latin* language). Furthermore the New Testament is widely quoted in the writings and sermons of Church Fathers from the second century onwards. Just to take one important early example, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, writing a work of five books entitled *Against Heresies* around AD 180, quotes 1,075 different passages from New Testament texts.³ And Irenaeus is not exceptional. One scholar counted 29,540 quotations from the New Testament in the works of Augustine (AD 354–430), bishop of Hippo in North Africa.⁴ If one were to imagine that we were without even a single manuscript of the New Testament in Greek, it would nevertheless be possible to

reconstruct it almost entirely (although not always with complete confidence about the precise wording) from the combined witness of early versions of the New Testament in other languages and quotations from and discussions of the New Testament in early Christian preachers and teachers. When we factor in the numerous good and early Greek manuscripts which do exist, and the

The wealth of material undergirding the text of the New Testament becomes overwhelming

vast numbers of NT manuscripts produced down the centuries, and begin to compare the transmission of the New Testament with other literary works of the period, the wealth of material undergirding the text of the New Testament as it has come down to us, becomes overwhelming.

For comparative purposes I will take three individual writers from the first-century: the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, writing in Rome between AD 70 and 100; the Jewish exegetical philosopher, Philo, writing in Alexandria in the middle of the first century, and the Roman historian Tacitus.

Josephus

The Jewish historian Josephus, for example, wrote a series of works on the history of the Jewish nation. We have 134 manuscripts containing portions of the Greek text of Josephus, but they, with a single known exception are mostly late, dating from the eleventh century and onwards. There are also two substantial Latin texts and some other fragments, from the sixth to the ninth century. These manuscripts seem to be derived from one manuscript tradition, they have a number of gaps, some of which can be filled from a Latin version (*Apion* II.52–113); but others of which remain unsolved (for example *Life* 47, 143, 411). There is *one* Greek papyrus manuscript (of *Jewish War* II.576–79 and 582–84) dating from the 4th Century, but this relatively small fragment (only 38 complete words) creates numerous difficulties as it differs in nine places from all other known manuscripts.⁵ The preface to the standard text and translation of Josephus notes that

The difficulties which confront the edition of Josephus range from a comparative paucity of ancient manuscripts, the inconsistency of some manuscripts, which renders grouping uncertain, and the fact that corruption has often affected the text of all.⁶

While the problems do not render the text of Josephus generally irrecoverable, they are significant, and render it sometimes difficult to establish what Josephus actually wrote.

Philo

Josephus' older contemporary Philo, the Jewish philosopher and exegete based in Alexandria, wrote more than seventy books on different subjects but not all of these have survived. Only thirty-seven survive in Greek manuscripts, while twelve others have come down to us only in *Armenian* translations (some excerpts can be uncovered from quotations in other writers). There are 65 manuscripts, dating from the ninth century or later, together with some early texts on papyrus (including two quite substantial manuscripts from the third century). Thus we now have only a little more than half of what we know Philo to have written, and although we have some early manuscripts, there is very little evidence in the five hundred years between the fourth and the ninth centuries.⁷

We now have only a little more than half of what we know Philo to have written

Tacitus

Like Philo, there are a number of works of Tacitus, the Roman historian, which do not survive at all. Of the twelve or fourteen books of his *Histories*, only four and a bit are extant, and these through a single eleventh century manuscript and a number of fifteenth century copies of that particular manuscript. Of the sixteen or eighteen books originally contained in his *Annals*, only portions survive in two separate and not overlapping manuscripts (books 1–4, 6, 12–15 survive intact, with portions of book 5, 11, 16). On many occasions we are therefore dependent on a single quite late manuscript for the text of Tacitus, one of the most important historians of the period.

New Testament

These three writers all wrote in the same era as the New Testament writers, two of the three wrote in the same language (Greek). The manuscript traditions for all three are different, yet generally the manuscript evidence for their works is quite late and sometimes based on a single manuscript tradition. By comparison, when we come to examine the New Testament writings, we find that the picture is completely different. This is not simply because of the great number of NT manuscripts overall, as popular Christian apologetic sometimes presents it. The transmission of the NT text is manifestly different—we have more manuscripts, more translations into more other languages, we have NT manuscripts in significant numbers from *every* Christian century up to the invention of printing, we have more early texts, including possibly half a dozen from the second century. There are basically no chronological gaps in the manuscript record. We have complete collections from the fourth century which by and large stand in the same tradition as the very earliest fragments we have. And we have sufficient diversity in the early manuscripts to be sure that the remaining manuscripts are not all filtered through a single manuscript tradition.

Indeed, it is precisely the wealth of manuscript evidence produces something of a problem, or a complication for the New Testament scholar. Researchers studying the works of other ancient writers have been able to ‘map’ the manuscript evidence and produce ‘family trees’ (or ‘stemma’) showing the likely derivation of one manuscript from another. That has proved completely impossible for the New Testament. There are thousands of manuscripts, from all over the ancient world—Jerusalem, Caesarea, Antioch, Ephesus, Rome, Alexandria—representing the reality of Christianity as a multi-centre faith.

Documentary evidence for the NT is much stronger than for any comparable works from the ancient world

No simple stemma has ever been plausibly constructed from the extant evidence.

In addition, it is fair to say that, precisely because the New Testament was uniquely important as Scripture, as the Word of God, Christian scribes sometimes tried to make things a little bit clearer for their readers. Occasionally they would paraphrase or re-write a verse in order to bring out what they considered to be its meaning, just as a Bible study group leader might do today.⁸ While the diverse motivations of Christian scribes and the extreme wealth of extant material pose some unresolved questions that continue to be the focus of scholarly work, it is important to remember that the documentary evidence for the New Testament is very strong, and much stronger than for any comparable works from the ancient world. A study of the diverse manuscript traditions should give us confidence that, in general, the original text has been reliably transmitted. Researchers working on the text of the New Testament would agree that when we read the letters of St Paul, for example, we are *substantially* in touch with the Apostle's original words. There are, of course, minor variations in the manuscripts, which are often indicated in the footnotes of our English translations of the Bible, some of which continue to be debated, but these give little cause for concern about the general reliability of the New Testament text.

Questions

- 1 Can you think of any major weaknesses in the comparison made in this section between the text of the New Testament and the three other sources?
- 2 How might believing in the message of the New Testament make scribes less careful?
- 3 How does the sheer number of manuscripts influence the study of the text of the Greek New Testament?

4

Is the New Testament Canon Reliable?

Of course, a reliable text of the documents which make up the New Testament, however important a conclusion drawn from our preceding discussion, will not result in a generally reliable New Testament canon if the process of selection was arbitrary and mistaken.

What about the materials that were left out of the New Testament canon collection? Was it not a bit arbitrary to include the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and leave out a number of similar writings? And why does Paul have so many letters in the New Testament when James, Peter and the others have a much smaller number?

Why does Paul have so many letters in the NT and the others have a much smaller number?

Without entering into this subject in any complete way here, I shall make some brief comments about the formation of the NT canon and then some remarks about two extra-canonical gospels which have had some publicity recently. Although not without dissenting voices, a consensus view would be that by the end of the second century the core of the NT as we know it

was universally accepted among orthodox Christians.⁹ By 'core' I mean the four gospels, the letters of Paul, and at least 1 Peter and 1 John. Evidence from the end of the second century and the beginning of the third in Irenaeus, Origen and Tertullian alongside an early canon list called the Muratorian Canon confirms this view.¹⁰ Earlier writings from Clement of Rome (writing in the 90s), Ignatius (writing in the 110s), Papias (around 120), Polycarp (writing about 150), and Justin Martyr (writing in Rome in the middle of the second century) reflect some of the developments which lead to the consensus.

From around the end of the second century the phrase 'the new testament' came into use in referring to this collection. Any debates that occurred in subsequent years seems to have been about what we might call 'the others.' What do we do with James—who wrote that? What about 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John? Are they too small to be included? And what about Revelation? Is it not a bit weird to be included in the Christian Bible?

Other Contenders

It is true that there were other claimants, and recently some scholars, together with a number of more popular writers, have advocated one or more of these other gospels as the true source of information about Jesus. One ancient tradition, in the curiously entitled Egyptian work called *The Book of the Bee*, says that each one of the Twelve and each one of the Seventy sent out by Jesus wrote a gospel (ch 49). Now, if eighty-two gospels seems a little excessive, it is worth noting that that at least forty gospels are named in ancient sources, but in many cases we know little beyond a name or title, and with fragmentary material on papyrus often there is no name at all. Of those which survived, particular popular attention has traditionally been given to the ‘Infancy Gospels’ which contain spectacular miracles and curious stories about the activities of the infant Jesus. Two of such texts, the second century Greek *Protevangelium of James* and the later Latin derivative *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* have exerted considerable influence within Christian piety over the centuries. More recently, attention has periodically also been given to finds of extra-canonical gospel texts, often with exotic sounding names like the *Secret Gospel of Mark* or the *Gnostic Gospel* or the *Unknown Gospel*. Although it is important and fascinating to study such texts, often the manuscripts are in a pretty fragmentary state. It seems that the less that is known about a text the more grandiose a title it is given! In these three cases we are dealing with:

At least forty gospels are named in ancient sources, but in many cases we know little beyond a name or title

- the *Secret Gospel of Mark* consists of some short fragments preserved in a letter purported to be written early in the third century by Clement of Alexandria, but preserved only in a disputed seventeenth century manuscript, which may in fact be a total forgery;
- the so-called *Gnostic Gospel* is a sixth or seventh century Coptic text far removed from the early period;
- the *Unknown Gospel* (also known as Egerton 2) is an important second century text which is unfortunately limited to only one badly damaged page of stories about and sayings of Jesus (several of which seem to be influenced by John’s gospel).

Recent scholarly attention has focused on two other, more substantial, early extra-canonical ‘gospels’: the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Gospel of Thomas*.¹¹

Some of the Other Gospels Referred to in the Early Church or Extant in Manuscript Form

Gospel of Andrew	Secret Gospel of Mark
Gospel of Apelles	Gospel of the Great and Little Questions of Mary
Gospel of Barnabas	Gospel of the Birth of Mary
Gospel of Bartholomew	Gospel of the Death of Mary the Virgin
Gospel of Basilides	Gospel of Matthias
Gospel of the Birth of Jesus the Nazarene	Hebrew Gospel of Matthew
Gospel of Cerinthus	Gospel of Merinthus
Gospel of the Ebionites, Egerton Gospel	Gospel of the Nazarenes
Gospel of the Egyptians	Gospel of Nicodemus
Gospel of the Encratites	Gospel of Paul
Gospel of the Eternal	Gospel of Perfection
Gospel of Eve	Gospel of Peter
Gospel of the Gnostics	Gospel of Philip
Gospel of the Hebrews	Gospel of the Pleroma
Gospel of Hesychius	Dialogue of the Saviour
Gospel of the Infancy	Gospel of the Saviour
Infancy Gospel of James	Gospel of the Simonites
Gospel of James the Great	Sophia of Jesus Christ
Gospel of Saint James the Chief	Gospel of the Syrians
Gospel of James the Less	Gospel of Tatian
Gospel of Judas	Gospel of Thaddeus (Jude Thaddaeus)
Gospel of Judas nicknamed Ish Qeriyot	Gospel of Thomas
Gospel of Leucius and Seleucus	Gospel of Truth
Gospel of Life	Gospel of the Twelve Apostles
Gospel of the Manicheans	Gospel of Valentinus
Gospel of Marcion	

The Gospel of Peter

In 1887, investigators excavating a Christian grave in Akhmîm, Egypt found the skeleton to be still grasping a codex. This codex included a number of texts, including a version of the passion narrative written in the first person and claiming to be the eye-witness account of the Apostle Peter (vv 26, 60).¹² After its discovery, the document was related to a number of brief comments from the early Church describing a Gospel of Peter that was known and used in some churches but condemned in others.¹³ Hence its designation as the *Gospel of Peter*. Subsequently, four or five early fragments have been found in Egypt, reflecting the fact that it was widely known and copied.¹⁴

So we know that there was a gospel attributed to Peter, in existence earlier than AD 200, at least, and we have a much later manuscript (perhaps sixth century) containing a large (although incomplete) fragment of it. It is an important source for the study of early Christianity, but for a number of reasons I do not think it is important for the study of Jesus and his teaching and ministry. One is the exaggerated miraculous content of the *Gospel of Peter*. For example, at the end of the gospel there is an account of the resurrection which is in marked contrast with the story in the canonical gospels. The four canonical gospels tell us that Jesus rose from the dead, but they do not tell us what happened when he came out of the tomb. The *Gospel of Peter* fills in the blank with great lights, two angels leading Jesus out of the tomb, and Jesus' head reaching high into the clouds. The Cross itself follows Jesus out of the grave, a voice from the cloud asks 'have you preached to the spirits in prison?' and the Cross replies 'yes.' I think this is an example of a fervent middle second-century Christian imagination, adding the popular piety of the times to details in the original gospel record. Notwithstanding one or two extravagant claims, I think we should regard this as a very important relic of second-century Christianity but not a very important record of first-century Christianity.

I think this is an example of a fervent middle second-century Christian imagination

The Gospel of Thomas

The situation is very similar with the *Gospel of Thomas*. In 1945 a farmer looking for fertilizer in Egypt cracked open a big jar. In that jar were twelve different codex books. He had uncovered a library of Gnostic, heretical books, from the fourth century, which is now known, after the location of its discovery, as the Nag Hammadi Library. One of the most important of these Coptic texts is the *Gospel of Thomas*, which consists of a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus (not originally numbered) and concludes with the title: 'The

Gospel According to Thomas.’ References to this text in Church Fathers and Greek fragments from the third century suggest that this text was probably in circulation by the early part of the third century.¹⁵ But evidence is completely lacking for some of the sensationalist claims sometimes made for the *Gospel of Thomas*. The available evidence suggests that the text of this sayings collection was not particularly stable, even in the third century—the later Coptic text is almost certainly a translation from Greek, but does not agree in every respect with the extant Greek fragments, and neither agrees exactly with the citations of this text in Church Fathers.¹⁶ Attempts to ascertain what the text may have been like in the second or even the first century are not only precarious but are actually more like imaginative fictions. There simply is no evidence for the existence of this text in that period.

On internal grounds we should note that the *Gospel of Thomas* is a sayings collection; there is no substantial narrative, no miracle stories, no account of the birth, passion, death or resurrection of Jesus.¹⁷ Despite having 114 sayings, there is practically nothing directly related to life in first-century Palestine. It does contain sayings which are closely parallel to sayings in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), but their order does not correspond to the order of sayings in any of the synoptics. The *Gospel of Thomas* does, however, contain parallels to unique material from each of the four canonical gospels¹⁸ as well as more general resemblances to passages throughout the NT.¹⁹ Although the relationship between the *Gospel of Thomas* and the canonical gospels continues to be debated, the most likely scenario in my view is that *Gospel of Thomas* depends, not on the canonical gospels in their literary forms, but on a ‘post-literary orality’—use of spoken traditions which derived from the canonical gospels and circulated independently.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is therefore a fascinating and important relic from the middle to late second century. In general, the sayings basically reflect a quasi-Gnostic understanding of the teachings of Jesus, talking about ‘finding the All that is in everybody’ (for example sayings 2, 67, 77), or of finding oneself (sayings 3, 67, 111). In some ways it is an anti-Christian document which actually depends on and re-interprets the material in the canonical gospels (and beyond). For example, there is a parody of the episode at Caesarea Phillippi where Jesus asks the disciples ‘who do you say that I am?’ In the canonical gospels, Peter recognizes Jesus as the Christ. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Peter replies in positive terms but Thomas, the hero of the story, says, ‘Lord, I am not at all able to say who you are’ (saying 13). For this he is commended by Jesus. This story, like some others, seems to represent an anti-confessional interpretation of the life and ministry of Jesus.²⁰

Conclusion

It may be said with confidence that none of the non-canonical gospels offer any independent information about Jesus which is of any substance, even if there are one or two additional sayings that may be genuine. These alternatives to the four gospels are broadly dependent on our canonical gospels. Our conclusion must be that there are no realistic alternatives to our four gospels if we are looking for historical information about Jesus. By comparison to their rivals (if in fact this is the right way to depict the anticipated function of the extra-canonical gospels), the four gospels are quite self-disciplined and reticent when it comes to describing the miracles of Jesus. The four had credible connections with apostolic times (and certainly come from the first century). Matthew and John were widely used and quoted, although admittedly Luke and especially Mark were less well used. Of course, the non-canonical gospels are important sources for information about the way that the stories of Jesus were heard and re-told by Christians and others in the second and third centuries. They may also be important sources of information about the way in which Christian communities of that period viewed the sources that had come down to them, and more work needs to be done in this area. But they are not a threat to the integrity of the canon. It was certainly no accident that the church recognized the four gospels as we know them, and the extra-canonical gospels are not the sort of documents to which we should turn for information about the life and ministry of Jesus.

None of the non-canonical gospels offer any independent information about Jesus which is of any substance

It was certainly no accident that the church recognized the four gospels as we know them

Questions

- 1 Why do you think so many 'gospels,' attached to so many different names were produced in the early church?
- 2 What sort of evidence would persuade you to take a newly discovered gospel seriously as a source for genuine information about Jesus?
- 3 How would you find out more about non-canonical gospels?

5

Is the Gospel Tradition about Jesus Reliable?

So far we have argued that the textual tradition of the NT is reliable, that the various parts of the NT were quickly gathered into an authoritative collection (canon), and that the non-canonical gospels do not provide reliable alternative sources of information about Jesus.

However, important as these conclusions are, they do not establish that the gospels and the rest of the New Testament as we have it are reliable as a source of historical information about Jesus and the early church. I think we can be sure that we have access to what Matthew wanted to say. But did Matthew know what he was talking about? Did Mark, or Luke, or John? How might we approach this question? I would like to offer an outline of a three-fold approach, looking at the letters in the NT, the significance of Jesus as a teacher and the impact this had on the tradition, and what the gospels claim for themselves.

Starting from Paul and the Letters

First, I would like to say something about the epistles of the New Testament, and their bearing on the reliability of what the gospels say about Jesus. In the New Testament we have a number of letters from St Paul—1 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians and others—that we can date quite securely and without too much disagreement. In all of these documents we see early Christianity defining itself as the movement started by Jesus of Nazareth and now based on faith in him as expressed in the gospel message that he died for our sins according to the Scriptures and was raised from the dead by God. Although Paul's focus is normally upon these great events of salvation history he also mentions in passing numerous details about Jesus' life.

In Paul's letters the apostles still had an important role as witnessing to the great events of the life of Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 15.5–6; *cf* Acts 1.21f) and, once or twice, you get specific allusions to events later recorded in the gospels. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11 there is the famous passage in which Paul refers to the institution of the Lord's Supper, 'On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and he broke it...' Paul is reminding his readers

What Does Paul Say About Jesus?

- a born of woman, and under law (Gal 4.4; Rom 1.3?)
- b descended from David (Rom 1.3), Messiah (1 Cor 15.3), seed of Abraham (Gal 3.16)
- c ministered primarily to Israel (Rom 15.8)
- d had a brother named James and others (Gal 1.19; 1 Cor 9.5)
- e had a humble and meek lifestyle (2 Cor 10.1)
- f instituted communion meal (1 Cor 11.23)
- g was betrayed (1 Cor 11.23)
- h was cruelly treated (Rom 15.3) and gave testimony before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim 6.13)
- i was crucified (Gal 2.20; 3.1; Phil 2.8; 1 Cor 2.2, 8) at the instigation of Jews of Judea (1 Thess 2.14f)
- j died (1 Cor 15.3)
- k was buried (1 Cor 15.4; cf Acts 13.29)
- l was raised from the dead (1 Cor 15.5)
- m was taken up to heaven (Rom 10.6; Eph 4.9)

of what they already know, something that he had passed on to them when he had first brought his gospel message to Corinth and which dates back to the earliest days of the Christian mission. Already there was a narrative of the Passion (note this took place ‘on the night that he was betrayed,’ presuming that it takes a place within a narrative of the other events of his betrayal), though it may not have been written down until a later stage. This presumes that the early Christians were taught about Jesus life and teachings from the earliest days of the church’s foundation (as 1 Cor 15.1–3 affirms; see also Rom 6.17; 16.17; 1 Cor 11.2).²¹ In 1 Corinthians Paul clearly distinguishes between what he knows that Jesus said and what he says on his own authority (1 Cor 7.10, 12, 25; compare 9.14f), showing that the traditions about Jesus’ teaching which he knew were not vague and flexible but definite and fixed. Paul even knew what Jesus did not say (1 Cor 7.25)—this requires a clear conception and knowledge of the tradition.

Paul is reminding his readers of what they already know

The Significance of Jesus the Teacher

This evidence suggests that traditions about Jesus were taught in and to the Pauline churches (note the importance of teachers in for example Acts 13.1; Rom 12.7; 1 Cor 12.28f; Eph 4.1). Allusions to Jesus' teaching in other writings to churches not founded by Paul, including Romans, 1 Peter, James and even Revelation suggest that the pattern of instruction in the Jesus tradition was characteristic of early Christianity as a whole. This corresponds, of course, to the picture of Jesus as the one who originated that tradition through his memorable and powerful teaching. Throughout the gospels Jesus is presented as a memorable speaker and as a preacher and miracle-worker of great power and authority. Even if we compare his teaching with that of Jewish rabbis, we discover someone who constructed his teaching in memorable ways so that his disciples could remember them. He was someone who was quickly regarded, by his disciples at least, as a Messianic figure and we know that throughout Judaism it was believed that, when the Messiah came, he would speak God's truth and wisdom. It would be likely that those who believed in him would pay close attention to the truth and wisdom he spoke. In Jesus we have a teacher whose words were memorable, who was perceived as the Messiah, and whose words were remembered.²²

In every strand of the gospel traditions Jesus is presented as a teacher, a rabbi. Thus 'all historical probability favours the conclusion that Jesus' disciples would have valued his words at least as highly as the pupils of the famous rabbis valued theirs.'²³

The Importance of the Apostles

In terms of the actual historical process it is clear that the earliest authoritative Christian traditions were oral—the preaching about Jesus from the mouths of the apostles and early evangelists. Basic to any approach that would do justice to the evidence of the NT itself will be the strategic importance of the apostles. Chosen by the Lord Jesus (Mark 3; Matt 10; Luke 6.13ff: called apostles) to represent, in some sense or another, a renewed Israel (hence normally called 'twelve' see especially Matt 19.28) and sent out by him as his own representatives to proclaim the presence of the kingdom (Matt 10; Luke 9), they function like the Jewish rabbinical idea of *shaliach* ('the one sent is like the man himself'; compare Luke 10.16; John 12.44f; 13.20; Acts 9.4; Gal 4.14) with an authority derived from their master. For this reason, Christianity is not the least troubled by the fact that Jesus himself, as far as we know, committed nothing to writing; his apostles were to be his representatives. Their role as bearers of the tradition began during Jesus' ministry with their own proclamation of the kingdom and continued after his death and resurrection (see for example Acts 1.21f; 2.42).

This view is confirmed very clearly by the way in which the twelve are depicted in Matt 10. *The disciples are like their master*, with:

- a similar authority to exorcise and heal (10.1 compare 4.23; 9.35);
- b a ministry limited to Israel (10.5f; compare 15.24);
- c a message centring on the presence of kingdom (10.7 compare 4.17);
- d a kingdom presence demonstrated in miraculous activity (10.8 *cf* 11.5 and chs 8 and 9: heal sick, raise dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons);
- e they went without material support (10.9f; compare 8.20);
- f they could expect judgment for those who rejected their message (10.15 compare 11.20ff), to be scourged by Gentiles (10.17; compare 20.19), to be rejected by family (10.21; compare 12.46–50; 13.57), and to be delivered up to death (10.21; compare 20.18f).

Furthermore the *disciples' authority is derived from their master*. They are called and sent by Jesus' initiative, in a mission which is an extension of his (*eg* 10.1, 5); they are sent as sheep to sheep (10.16), Jesus remains the shepherd (9.36); they are sent out 'for Jesus sake' (10.1; 22) and confessing Jesus (10.32f), their allegiance to him is to be absolute (10.37–39). Indeed, the disciples' relationship to Jesus is somewhat analogous to the prophets' relationship to God (10.17 *cf* 23.34; and 5.11f).

In the early period the apostolic witness provided the authoritative historical and theological foundations of the faith (see Matt 16.18; Eph 2.20). In particular they are witnesses to the ministry, death and resurrection of Christ as the fulfilment of God's redemptive new-covenant historical plan of salvation (see Acts 1.21–26; 2.32; compare 1 Cor 9.1; 15.7–9). It is through the apostolic circle that the Holy Spirit fulfils Christ's promise to 'teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you' (John 14.26; 15.26; compare Acts 1.8; 1 Thess 2.13). This already corresponds to the basic shape of the new covenant Scripture: gospel and epistle. Before ever an apostle put pen to paper a canonical authority already resided in apostolic teaching (1 Cor 11.2; 2 Thess 2.15 and elsewhere), which was the sacred deposit that later generations should guard and protect (1 Tim 6.20; 2 Tim 1.14).²⁴

Writing Down the Tradition

The writing down of apostolic tradition emerges when the Christian message has been spread sufficiently to make geographical distance a big factor. Thus the letters appear to be intended to replicate the presence of an apostle

in guiding a church through problems or false teaching. And the circulars are designed to bring the same message to a series of separate churches (James, 1 Peter, Revelation, possibly Ephesians). The letters themselves, like the apostolic teaching they contain, are regarded as authoritative teaching; hence the apostolic introductions (as in Rom 1.1–7), the public reading (Col 4.16; 1 Thess 5.27; 2 Cor 1.1), the actual content (2 Cor 10.9–10; 1 Cor 7.17; 14.37) and the emergence of imitations (see 2 Thess 2.2; 3.17).²⁵

Perhaps chronological distance may be added to geographical distance as a factor prompting the writing of the gospel. There is a desire to preserve the authoritative memory for future generation (Luke 1.1–4; John 19.35; 20.30f; 21.23).²⁶ From the earliest stages Jesus' words were accorded a status equivalent to that of the OT Scriptures (see his own teaching, for example Matt 5; 24.35), and functioned as the basis for specific authoritative appeal (see 1 Cor 7, esp v 10f; 9.14; 11.23–25; 1 Thess 4.15–27; 1 Tim 5.18; Acts 20.35) and for general ethical instruction (as in Rom 12–15; James).²⁷

Jesus' words and deeds made an impact and he appointed Twelve to be with him and to be the link and continuity between his life, ministry, death and resurrection and the early church. Of course, there were not only the Twelve. If we read the story we find that the Twelve temporarily deserted Jesus after his arrest and it was the *women* who had followed him from Galilee who became the focus of continuity. These were the women who had seen Jesus die, who knew where the tomb was located, and who had found the tomb empty. So there were others beside the Twelve to pass on the story and Luke speaks about 120 who saw Jesus soon after the resurrection.²⁸

The Gospels and the Apostolic Tradition

So Jesus himself initiated the process by which his disciples would remember his teaching, and the apostles themselves served as witnesses to the tradition of Jesus' teaching and activity. As the third stage of our argument, we have to ask about the gospels themselves, their connection to this collective apostolic memory and what sort of documents that the four gospels portray themselves as being. This is, perhaps, best expressed in Luke's introduction. Of all the gospel writers it is Luke who provides the most information about his sources, though there are also references in the Gospel of John to the writer as a '*true witness*' to the events described (eg John 19.35; 20.24; cf 1 John 1.1). In the first few verses of Luke, the author explains:

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 eye-witnesses 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. (Luke 1.1–4)

Clearly, in Luke's time there were other accounts, whether oral or written down, which were not fully adequate for what Luke had in mind. But behind these other accounts lies the same ultimate source as for Luke's own account: it was the 'eye-witnesses and servants of the word' who handed down the record of the events. Luke is claiming that his record of Jesus' life is one handed down by those who were personally involved in the events described. Primarily of course Luke means the apostles (see especially Acts 1.21f; also 2.32; 3.15; 4.20; 5.32; 10.39), although it is supremely likely that other eye-witnesses, especially for example the women who travelled with the twelve, would also have contributed to Luke's story (especially Luke 8.1–3; 23.49, 55; 24.1–11). This is a fundamentally important claim.²⁸ It is also significant that Luke had followed the matter closely and had written down his account in an 'orderly' fashion for his 'most excellent Theophilus,' whom I assume was a real person, perhaps a patron. Luke writes so that Theophilus' faith, or the information that he has received, might be confirmed. Although Luke was writing a *theological* account of what God has accomplished through Christ rather than neutral 'brute facts' about the life of Jesus, his agenda is clearly to produce a reliable and orderly account.

What is Claimed for the Reliability of the Gospels (and What is Not)

Interestingly, there are certain things that Luke does *not* claim and other things that his claim does not apparently include. He does not claim any direct divine inspiration but explains that he has been through the normal human process of collecting and processing information that has been handed down from the earliest years of the Christian church. Nor does this claim mean or entail that Luke has recorded the exact chronological order of events. That becomes fairly clear when you read Luke's gospel. You may recall that from chapters 10–19 Luke provides a 'travel narrative' of what happened when Jesus 'set his face to go to Jerusalem.' The events are obviously not recorded in an exact chronological order. In chapter 9 when Jesus starts his journey he meets some Samaritans, in a region that was three days walk from Jerusalem. In chapter 17, after eight chapters of walking, he still appears to be in the same physical location! The journey that Luke relates is as much a *metaphorical* journey, in which the cross dominates the vision of Jesus, as it is a real journey. If it is not necessarily exact chronology, nor does Luke, or any

of the other gospel writers, claim to have given an exact transcription of the words of Jesus. While Jesus originally spoke in Aramaic, the gospels are written in Greek, and translation is always an interpretative process. If we compare Matthew, Mark and Luke we find passages where the writers show their own tendencies to paraphrase the original material. There were many different ways to convey the content of Jesus’ teaching, from direct transliteration of Aramaic terms, through close translation, loose translation, paraphrase and summary, examples of each might easily be found in the gospels. Scholars often distinguish between the *ipsissima verba*, the actual words of Jesus, which we do not necessarily know, and the *ipsissima vox*, the actual voice or meaning of Jesus, which, in my view, we always do. Of course it is worth noting that in general there is less variation when the gospels report Jesus’ speech than when they report Jesus’ actions. A number of recent studies have highlighted the differences in style between the openings of the gospels—where the authors felt most free to put their own theological gloss or spin on the events they are about to relate—and the middle sections where they describe the main things that Jesus said and did.³⁰ Nevertheless, check almost any passage in three gospels and you will find variations in the wording. A striking example of the type of variation that I am thinking of relates to the only written material from the ministry of Jesus—the *titulus*, the title placed over Jesus on the cross. Here we can see a good example of variations within a general framework of four reliable reports.

Matt 27.37	Mark 15.26	Luke 23.38	John 19.19–20
And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, ‘This is Jesus the King of the Jews.’	And the inscription of the charge against him read, ‘The King of the Jews.’	There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’	Pilate also wrote a title and put it on the cross; it read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’ ³¹

So it is not an exact verbal accuracy that I have in mind when I claim that the gospels are reliable.³² But, in general, Luke—and Matthew and Mark, whose account of Jesus is in substantial agreement with Luke, though their details and styles may differ—*claims* to be reliable, and we need to take this claim seriously.

6

Conclusion

So what does the documentary evidence allow us to conclude about the reliability of the New Testament?

We are overwhelmed with evidence in relation to the Greek New Testament and this shows that we have reliable access to what the original authors wrote. We have early and substantial manuscripts. Precisely because of the vast number of manuscripts there are issues that remain to be fully understood. But on a number of occasions in the past new and earlier manuscripts have been discovered and these have consistently confirmed the accuracy of manuscripts from later centuries—confounding the scepticism of scholars who had expressed doubts.

In terms of selection, my own view is that the selection process was simply a matter of the early church acknowledging those gospels and letters which had impressed themselves as being apostolic and in agreement with the tradition of Jesus that had been passed on to the churches. In terms of internal evidence, clearly there is a lot more that we could say, but I think we have a three-fold movement. The epistles show us a type of Christianity existing; the gospels *claim* to be giving us reliable information; and what we know from the gospels about Jesus leads us to believe that he was the sort of person whose teachings and deeds would be remembered. The apostles, and the women from Galilee, were a particularly important line of continuity.

The apostles, and the women from Galilee, were a particularly important line of continuity

Clearly, we have only begun to sketch out the outlines of an argument. Equally clearly, the whole question raises the ultimate issue of the status of Jesus Christ. It remains difficult to accept that the gospels are reliable unless one also accepts their witness to Jesus Christ as the divine Messiah and Lord. There is an element of ‘ultimacy’ about this question which cannot be adequately treated here. Nevertheless I hope to have shown that the Christian reverence for Christ the Lord, the hope that is within us, is based on a sufficiently reliable foundation in the Scriptures of the New Testament themselves.³³

Notes

These notes provide more evidence in support of positions discussed in this booklet as well as further reading for those interested. Abbreviations used follow standard academic usage. For further information, visit the online resources page at www.grovebooks.co.uk

- 1 For information and photographs of manuscripts mentioned see B M Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 1981).
- 2 See Jer 31.31ff; the last supper saying (Matt 26.28; Mark 14.24; Luke 22.20; 1 Cor 11.25) and the covenant language of 2 Cor 3.6; Heb 7.22; 8.6–13; 9; 12.18–24.
- 3 626 from gospels, 54 from Acts, 280 from Pauline epistles (not Philemon), 15 from Catholic epistles (not from 2 Peter, 3 John, Jude), 29 from Revelation (acc B M Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) p 154).
- 4 E Nestle, *Einführung in das Griechische Neue Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1899, 2nd ed) p 117, referring to the work of Paul de Lagarde.
- 5 Further problems are raised by the fact that while Origen (early in the third century) stated, quite reasonably to most modern scholars, that Josephus did not believe that Jesus was the Christ (*Contra Celsum* I.47; cf *Comm Matt* 10.17); the extant texts of Josephus all in fact state that he *did* (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.63f). On this see now J Carleton Paget, ‘Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity’ *Journal of Theological Studies* 52(2001), 539–624.
- 6 H St J Thackeray, *Josephus* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP; London: William Heinemann, 1976) vol 1, pp xvii–xviii.
- 7 David T Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (CRINT: Van Gorcum: Assen, 1993).
- 8 I have studied some of these issues in ‘Christology and Textual Transmission: Reverential Alterations in the Synoptic Gospels’ *Novum Testamentum* 35 (1993) 105–129. A somewhat different approach is taken in the more wide-ranging (and widely cited) work on the subject B.D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1993).
- 9 For a thorough survey of the evidence see B M Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).
- 10 Crucial texts include: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III.i.1ff; III.xi.8; IV.xli.4 (written around AD 180); Origen (cca AD 185–254), as mentioned in Eusebius, *Eccl Hist* VI.xxv; *Hom in Jos* VII.1 (cited in Metzger, *Canon*, p 139); Tertullian, *Adv Marc* IV.i–vi [four Gospels]; *Adv Marc* V.i [on Paul]. The Muratorian Canon begins mid sentence with reference to Luke and John as the third and fourth gospels; then lists Acts of the Apostles, the seven-fold epistles of Paul to churches (Corinthians [twice], Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Galatians, Thessalonians [twice] and Romans), and his personal epistles to Philemon, Titus and Timothy [two]; the Apocalypse and epistles of John and Jude. The date is disputed, but a late second-century date remains the most likely one.
- 11 For introductions, texts and bibliographies see J K Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993). For influence and pictures see D R Cartlidge and J K Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London: Routledge, 2001).

- 12 The Gospel of Peter (GP) broadly follows the canonical order in its presentation of the events of the passion of Jesus, with one or two exceptions (for example Joseph's request for the body, v 3, is placed before the crucifixion). The mocking of Jesus—including elements paralleling the canonical gospels such as the purple robe, the crown of thorns, the spitting and scourging (vv 6–9)—follows the judgment. Then follows the crucifixion, which again contains many parallels to canonical material—the two other victims, the title, the division of the garments (vv 10–14). The death of Jesus on the cross (vv 15–20), although framed differently from the canonical gospels, follows their order with darkness, the drink, the cry from the cross and the tearing of the veil.

Between the death of Jesus (v 19) and the arrival of the women at the tomb early on the morning of the resurrection (v 50), GP contains a large amount of unique material. This new material is situated in a framework which parallels the canonical accounts: the earthquake (GP 21 *cf.* only Matt 27.51,54); the burial of Jesus (GP 23f *cf.* Matt 27.59f // Mark 15.45f // Luke 23.53); the appointment of a guard for the tomb (GP 28–34 *cf.* only Matt 27.62–66). Into this framework the new material includes the withdrawal of the nails and laying of the body on the ground as a prelude to the earthquake (v 21); the repentance of the Jews (vv 25–27); the appearance of the angels (and associated apocalyptic imagery) (vv 35f); the rolling away of the stone (v 37); the angels supporting Jesus (vv 39f), the voice from heaven (v 41), the cross—walking (v 40) and talking (v 42); and the discussions between Pilate and the soldiers (vv 45–49).

- 13 Especially important is the account of Serapion's encounter with the Gospel of Peter (he was bishop of Antioch, AD 190–210) recorded in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* VI.12); other references include Origen, *Comm Matt* 10.17; Eusebius, *HE* III.3.2; Jerome, *Illust* 1; Theodoret, *Haer* II.2; *Decretum Gelasianum*. For a full discussion (defending the view outlined here) see P M Head, 'On the Christology of the Gospel of Peter' *Vigiliae Christianae* 46.3(1992) pp 209–224.
- 14 P Oxy 2949 and P Cair 10759; P Oxy 4009; P Vindob 2325.
- 15 The earliest evidence consists of the citation of sayings similar to *GosThom* 4 and 11 in the *Refutations* of Hippolytus (in AD 230 *Refut* V.7.20). There is also a tradition that Jesus charged Thomas (as well as Philip and Matthew) with the writing of a gospel (*PistSoph* 42 and 43, *ca* AD 250). The Greek fragments (P Oxy 1, 654, 655) were from different manuscripts, but were all dated to the first half of the third century.
- 16 Hippolytus of Rome cites a variant form of saying 4 from 'the Gospel of Thomas' (*Haer* V.vii.20).
- 17 *GosThom* 55 mentions 'taking up one's cross' but ascribes no significance to it.
- 18 On John: 8.52 *cf GosThom* 1; 4.14 *cf GosThom* 13; 1.5,9 *cf GosThom* 24b; 7.33f *cf GosThom* 38b; 15 *cf GosThom* 40; 8.12 *cf GosThom* 77; 7.37 *cf GosThom* 108. On Luke: 17.21 *cf GosThom* 3; 12.49 *cf GosThom* 10; 12.16–21 *cf GosThom* 63; 12.13f *cf GosThom* 72; 11.27f; 23.29 *cf GosThom* 79; 6.34f *cf GosThom* 95; 17.20f *cf GosThom* 113. On Matthew: 18.1 *cf GosThom* 12; 22.14 *cf GosThom* 23; 18.20 *cf GosThom* 30; 5.14; 7.24f *cf GosThom* 32; 15.13 *cf GosThom* 40; 17.20 *cf GosThom* 48; 17.12 *cf GosThom* 51; 13.24–30 *cf GosThom* 57; 6.3 *cf GosThom* 62; 13.45; 6.20 *cf GosThom* 76; 11.28–30 *cf GosThom* 90; 7.6 *cf GosThom* 93; 23 *cf GosThom* 102; 13.44 *cf GosThom* 109. On Mark: 3.27; 4.29 *cf GosThom* 21; 8.36 *cf GosThom* 67; 14.58 *cf GosThom* 71; 12.34 *cf GosThom* 82.
- 19 *GosThom* 17 *cf* 1 Cor 2.9; *GosThom* 19 *cf* Rev 3.7; *GosThom* 28 *cf* 1 Tim 3.16; *GosThom* 53 *cf* Rom 2.25ff; *GosThom* 66 *cf* 1 Peter 2.6; *GosThom* 81 *cf* 1 Cor 4.8.
- 20 See *GosThom* 24, 37, 43, 52, 91 for other passages which seem to reflect a somewhat anti-confessional stance on the nature of the person of Jesus: questions on this topic are answered in a very elusive manner. In *GosThom* 52 the orthodox view that sees Jesus as

the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures is regarded as denying the living Jesus and concentrating on the dead prophets.

- 21 See P W Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (NSBT 3; Leicester: Apollos, 1997) pp 39–58 for a discussion of the relevance of the NT letters for the study of the historical Jesus. For a detailed study of what can be gleaned from one section of one letter see M B Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1–15.13* (JSNTSS 59; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).
- 22 For this view see especially R Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung* (WUNT 2.7; Tübingen: J C B Mohr, 1988, 3rd ed), or (more briefly, but in English): ‘Teacher’ in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester and Downers Grove: Apollos, 1992) pp 807–811; building on the earlier reflections of H Riesefeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings: A Study in the Limits of ‘Formgeschichte’* (London: A R Mowbray and Co, Ltd, 1957).
- 23 B Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (ASNU XXII; Lund: Gleerup, 1961) p 258.
- 24 For an older, but not for that reason valueless, contribution to this subject see N Geldenhuys, *Supreme Authority: The Authority of the Lord, His apostles and the New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1953) pp 46–84.
- 25 Note that some apostolic writings were not preserved (eg Paul’s letter to Corinth [1 Cor 5.9], possibly another letter; the letter to Laodicea [Col 4.16]).
- 26 cf Josephus: ‘In fact, the work of committing to writing events which have not previously before recorded and of commending to posterity the history of one’s own time is one which merits praise and acknowledgement’ (JW I. 15).
- 27 See most generally G N Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (SNTSMS 27; Cambridge: CUP, 1974). For detailed treatment of Jesus traditions in Romans see M Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: the Example and Teaching of Jesus in Rom 12.1–15.13* (JSNTSS 59; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); and for James, J B Mayor, *James*, pp lxxxi–lxxxiv.
- 28 See recently R J Bauckham, ‘The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Traditions’ *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 1.1(2003) pp 28–60.
- 29 On the importance of the apostles in early Christianity see N Geldenhuys, *Supreme Authority: The authority of the Lord, His apostles and the New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1953). For an appreciative and critical review of a recent full-length discussion of the role of eye-witness reports in the compilation of the gospels see P M Head, ‘the Role of Eyewitnesses in the Formation of the Gospel Tradition: A review article of Samuel Byrskog’s *Story as History—History as Story*’ *Tyndale Bulletin* 52 (2001) pp 275–294.
- 30 See E E Lemcio, *The Past of Jesus in the Gospels* (SNTSMS 68; Cambridge: CUP, 1991); M D Hooker, *Beginnings: Keys That Open the Gospels* (London: SCM, 1997).
- 31 John 19.20 adds ‘Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.’
- 32 For further discussion see D L Bock, ‘The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex’ in *Jesus Under Fire* (eds M J Wilkins and J P Moreland; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996) pp 73–100.
- 33 N B Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels: Some Basic Questions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963; then Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 reprint) pp 113–192 offers some important reflections on this theme; from a different perspective there are also interesting reflections in G Stanton, *Gospel Truth’ New Light on Jesus and the Gospels* (London: HarperCollins, 1995) pp 188–193.

The claims of Christianity stand or fall on the reliability of its founding documents, the collection known as the New Testament. But how do we know that this gives us a reliable picture of Jesus and early Christian belief?

Starting with what the NT actually is, this study examines in turn whether we can be confident that what we read is what the first authors wrote, whether the right documents were included, and whether these authors knew what they were talking about. It garners an impressive array of evidence that affirms the reliability of the NT as we have it.

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