

# THE GENUINE JESUS

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*FRESH EVIDENCE FROM HISTORY  
AND ARCHAEOLOGY*

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PAUL L. MAIER



KREGEL  
PUBLICATIONS

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## Introduction

OF ALL RELIGIOUS beliefs in the world, past or present, none have more thoroughly based themselves on history than Judaism and Christianity. The divine-human encounter in the biblical faiths have always involved claims about *real* people, living in *real* places, who acted in *real* events of the past, many of which are also cited in secular ancient history. Both Testaments of the Bible use the past tense of narrative prose—history’s medium—more than any other form of language.

Because Judeo-Christianity has so thoroughly influenced Western culture, we are prone to imagine that all other world religions have a similarly solid historical base. This is by no means the case. It can, in fact, be argued that *every* religious system before or since Judaism and Christianity has avoided any significant interaction with history, and instead has asked its followers to believe, by sheer faith alone, the claimed revelations of its founder(s). This is true of the mythologies of yesterday and the cults of today, the religions of the East and the New Age beliefs of the West.

Or, whenever links with genuine history *are* claimed—as it is with several modern belief systems today—these are never verified by secular history or the findings of archaeology. Typically, a single founder claims divine revelation, which is subsequently written down as a holy book for his or her following. The founder may well have been historical, of course, but one looks in vain for true correlations with secular history in the founder’s holy book. Rather than any private, once-for-all-time revelation, Judeo-Christianity’s Scriptures encompass a two-thousand-year-plus period—two millennia in which its holy books *constantly* interlaced themselves with history.

Instead of claiming a mythological founder, or one who materialized from the mists of the past in an appearance datable only to the nearest century or two, Christianity boldly asserts that Jesus’s public ministry began (in association with that of John the Baptist) in “the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee . . .” (Luke 3:1ff. RSV).

No mythological heroes or cardboard characters here! This sixfold documentation involves personalities and places, *all* of which are well-known *and historical*. In fact, we know even more about this collection of proper names from sources *outside* the New Testament. The author of 2 Peter expressed Christianity's "historical advantage" splendidly: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths . . . but we were eyewitnesses" (1:16).

So close an intersection with history, however, could have been hazardous for Christianity. Tangencies with known facts of the past could have laid the faith open to ridicule if it had garbled those facts. But rather than seeking the shelter of unprovable traditions to avoid such risk, Christianity instead threaded its origins into the very warp and woof of the past, becoming itself part of history's fabric. For that reason, it has also been held to *much* more stringent standards of critical evaluation than any other world religious system. This, however, was the price it gladly paid for having solid historical credentials.

History, however, is not Christianity's only ally nor its only avenue into the past. Its closest cousin is *archaeology*—the systematic excavations of sites where buried artifacts deliver hard evidence from the past. Though the very term reflects a crusty patina of age, archaeology is a comparatively young discipline, as scientific archaeology is little more than two centuries old. In that time, however, a bulging treasury of thousands of artifacts relating to the biblical world has been discovered, greatly enhancing our understanding of that world. Any interested person today can, if he or she wishes, know more about Jesus and the origins of Christianity than the greatest names in church history, including Calvin, Luther, Thomas Aquinas, or even Augustine.

One often hears the claim, "Nothing found by archaeologists has *ever* contradicted the Bible." This is simply not true. For example, when the Hebrews fought against their enemies, foreign reports of those campaigns sometimes differed dramatically from those in the Old Testament, which is precisely what we should expect of accounts "managed" by hostile court historians. The surrounding nations never admitted their defeats and converted some, in fact, to "victories."

Nor should anyone imagine that archaeologists go off to Israel or

Jordan and dig in order to “prove” something in the Bible. Scientific excavators dig only for the truth, letting the chips fall where they may. What is remarkable about the chips, however, is the vast percentage that fall in a manner highly congenial to the biblical record! Or, where archaeological evidence seems to conflict with Scripture, as with the excavations at Jericho, a new reading of the same evidence corrects previous misreadings.

Other useful tools for prying open the biblical past include such specialties within ancient history as the following:

*Linguistics and Literature:* Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek studies sharpen our understanding of what the texts of the Old and New Testaments actually say, especially in the context of the other languages and literature of those times.

*Geography:* From the Old Testament patriarchs to St. Paul, biblical sorts always seem to be moving from one place to the next. Many of these places are definitely identified today and can be explored.

*Meteorology and Climatology:* Are the winds, weather conditions, and famines described in Scripture credible? These specialties provide the answers.

*Politics and Law:* How can one fully understand the trial of Jesus or the many occasions when St. Paul faced a judge, for example, without invoking Roman law and politics?

*Economics:* The Gospels are full of references to coins, taxes, tax collectors, tribute, money changers, bills, wages, and means of livelihood. Some of the coins cited in Scripture have been discovered and then dated by yet another discipline: numismatics.

Sociology, botany, zoology, medicine, and other fields also have “past tenses” in the ancient world, and thus have value for biblical research. Even astronomy can play a role in helping explain the phenomenon that was the star of Bethlehem, for example, or the darkness on Good Friday.

In dealing with Jesus and the rise of Christianity, this book will utilize all of these avenues into the past, as well as others. The wealth of

information available from ancient history should then enrich our quest and help bridge the gap between what is secular and what is religious in biblical antiquity.

Such an approach should yield a fourfold benefit:

1. History and its related fields give us a means by which to “check up” on the Bible, to gauge its accuracy. Those with blind faith may object that this is both faithless and unnecessary, but in view of today’s critical challenges to Scripture, we have not only the right but the obligation to compare biblical evidence with secular.
2. From these different perspectives, we can see the biblical events in sharper focus and greater dimension. To use an analogy from photography, the New Testament is like the standard lens that comes with most cameras. But how gratifying it is to catch the scene from a different angle and use the telephoto or wide-angle lenses supplied by history and archaeology.
3. Problems in the biblical text can often be solved by recourse to the other ancient disciplines.
4. Gaps in the biblical record can often be filled in by correlating outside evidence from antiquity. Gaps certainly exist between the Old and New Testaments, at the close of the book of Acts, and elsewhere. None of these are an impediment to faith, but because Christian origins lie so conveniently in a historical plane, history can often supply appropriate data for the rest of the story.

Christmas, Lent-Easter, and Pentecost were chosen as the primary frames in this book for several reasons. These are the three greatest church festivals—great because they celebrate *the* most crucial foundations of Christianity in the incarnation and nativity, the passion and resurrection, and the explosive birth and growth of the early church. The New Testament provides progressively detailed information on each, and so does history—facts, rather than “cleverly devised myths.” Christians claim that all three extraordinary episodes occurred on a divinely arranged schedule.



## Christ or Caricature?

WHAT USED TO be called “the greatest life ever lived” has recently become “the greatest target ever known” on the firing ranges of sensationalist critics of every stripe. Shifting the metaphor, it seems as if there is a perverse Jesus contest today, in which the author who presents the most bizarre portrait of Jesus wins.

The rules are simple enough. First, you read the New Testament Gospels and draw a general sketch of Jesus. Then, distort that sketch as much as you please, add clashing colors, paint in a bizarre background, and if the surviving Christ resembles anything in the Gospels, you lose. But if you come up with a radically different—above all, sensational—portrait of Jesus, you win. The prizes are maximum coverage in the media, frowns from the faithful, and acclaim from everyone else.

This “Jesus contest” has been played ever since the pagan philosopher Celsus first helped set up the rules in the second century AD, but never with such enthusiasm as at the present moment. Every year, it seems, another “scholarly” book is published that purports to unveil the “real Jesus,” a figure startlingly different from anything confessed in the ancient creeds of the faith. And because it is largely scholars who have authored these books, the general public often infers that their findings must therefore be accurate and true. This conclusion is hopelessly mistaken.

The most important current caricatures of Jesus include the following, in approximate chronological order.

### **The Radical Revolutionary?**

The caricature of Jesus as political messiah was first proposed in 1931 by Robert Eisler in his book *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist*. But it was left to the late British scholar, Professor S. G. F. Brandon of the University of Manchester, to complete the argument in his two studies published in 1968: *Jesus and the Zealots* and *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth*. In this view, Christ becomes a political crusader, perhaps even a member of the radical Zealot party, whom Pilate actually *wanted* to crucify as a dangerous rebel. Wasn't one of the disciples, Simon Zelotes, very probably a member of the Zealots?

No teacher, however, is accurately reflected in a mere one-twelfth of his students, and there is no evidence that Simon continued his political affiliations once he became a disciple of Jesus. Christ's teachings ran totally counter to political violence, from His advice about turning the other cheek near the beginning of His ministry to His final remark to Peter in the garden of Gethsemane: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). The mark of accurate scholarship is to weigh the sum total of evidence, not take snippets and try to construct a rickety hypothesis around them. A recent attempt to revive this misunderstanding of Jesus was raised by Muslim scholar Reza Aslan in his book *Zealot: The Life and Time of Jesus of Nazareth*, but that view fared no better than the misunderstanding of the writers mentioned above.

### **A Passover Plotter?**

This version of Jesus derives, quite obviously, from the controversial book published in 1966 by England's Dr. Hugh Schonfield. His prime thesis is that Jesus schemed the whole Golgotha scenario down to the detail of drinking drugged wine, to place Himself into a deathlike state from which He could survive. Further, this unlikely scenario is perpetuated through the author's habit of beginning honestly enough with a given hypothesis ("Let us assume that such-and-such happened . . .") but then,

about twenty pages later, subtly converting this into a fact (“*Since such-and-such happened . . .*”), drawing all sorts of unwarranted conclusions from a premise never proven. Accordingly, *The Passover Plot* has been roundly disdained by nearly all serious scholars, Jewish and Christian alike.

### The Mushroom Myth

Another British scholar, John M. Allegro, who once did fine scholarly work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, published his philological study *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* in 1970. Quite likely, this is the most aberrant scholarly book ever published. Allegro’s exotic thesis is that Jesus and His disciples—perhaps David and Moses, too!—never existed as authentic people. The Bible stories about them were invented by the “myth-makers and cryptographers” of the Old and New Testaments to disguise their fertility cult, which centered in a phallic, hallucinogenic mushroom: the red-topped, white-flecked *Amanita muscaria*, commonly known as fly agaric. The ancient mushroom cult later developed into a mystery religion, whose initiates got high on the fungus and wrote the Gospels to cover their activities while communicating their secrets to others.

Much of the book is raw—sometimes wild and rampant—conjecture, which has no basis in the sources and is a disservice to serious scholarship. Allegro’s premise, that linguistic terms which sound vaguely similar must also be related, is faulty. At the simplest level, this is false for such English words as “pair” and “pear,” and it is false for most of the instances recorded in Allegro’s book. How, for example, did the author arrive at the genus and species of his red-topped mushroom with its scabby white flecks? Incredibly, he finds one important hint in Jesus’s friend Lazarus (whose name is nothing more than the New Testament equivalent of Eleazar in the Old). Lazarus, in the Allegro thesis, dissolves into a myth which is a color and texture clue to the mushroom. What the New Testament cryptographer had in mind here in his “Lazarus” was the term we know in English as “lazuli,” usually found in conjunction with “lapis” (“stone”) to describe a blue mineral.

Unhappily, this kind of preposterous reasoning (not to mention the attempted twist of blue to red via purple!) is typical of the book. What,

for example, did the 142 pages of notes in a dozen languages prove in *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*? Absolutely nothing, other than that the publishers of the book are guilty of ruthlessly sacrificing groves of trees for needless paper pulp. Small wonder that many of Allegro's scholarly colleagues in Britain themselves dismissed the book as a "scholarly hoax" or a "philologist's erotic nightmare."

### The Senescent Savior?

In 1973, an aging Jesus appeared in Irving Wallace's best-selling *The Word*. "Foul!" someone cries, and correctly so: Why introduce a novel into this listing of scholarly works? Certainly not to fault Mr. Wallace. Indeed, his far-out restyling of the life of Jesus is beyond scholarly critique, since he was honest enough to call his book a novel—a genre that other authors cited here might have used as a better vehicle than the nonfiction format!

*The Word* tells of the supposed discovery of a lost fifth gospel written by James, the half brother of Jesus, in which he reports how Christ survived Calvary to live on until He was finally crucified overlooking the Bay of Naples as a comparatively old man! What is astonishing, however, is the number of readers who somehow confuse fiction with fact.

In speaking engagements across the country, I find unbelievable questions raised again and again: "How come the church hasn't told us about the existence of a fifth gospel?" Or, from someone who had just read Taylor Caldwell's *Great Lion of God*: "Did the teenaged St. Paul really get seduced by a Syrian slave girl?" Incredible! But is their error any worse than that of those who generate actual fiction in the name of fact?

An even wilder version of the "senescent Savior" has been published in *The Jesus Scroll*, a book by Australian Donovan Joyce, who has Jesus fighting the Romans at Masada and dying at age eighty! Based on a fictional cloak-and-dagger episode at Israel's Ben Gurion Airport, where the author was supposedly asked to smuggle an ancient scroll out of the country, neither scroll nor scholar have surfaced since then! All of this is supposed to be fact, not fiction, but the prose reeks of anti-Christian animus. Yigael Yadin, the great Jewish archaeologist at Masada—who could have struck a massive blow for Judaism and against Christianity

if he had gone along with the book's premise—regards both the author and the work with absolute disdain.

### A Master Magician?

This magical character made his debut in 1973, with the publication of *The Secret Gospel* by Morton Smith of Columbia University. In the library of the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba near Jerusalem, Dr. Smith claimed to have found a letter fragment which he attributed to Clement of Alexandria, the famed second-century church father. In this fragment, Clement supposedly reported how Mark wrote his gospel in Rome and then returned to Alexandria, where he composed a “more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were being perfected.” Clement also cites a fragment purportedly from this spiritual gospel that adds variations to what is apparently the New Testament story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Purportedly the resurrected youth loved Jesus and six days later returned to Him wearing only a linen cloth. He “remained with him [Jesus] that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God.”

Smith published his findings in two books—one primarily for scholars, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, and the other for the general public, *The Secret Gospel*.<sup>1</sup> But alas, scholar Smith of the former book turns into a popularizing promulgator of the most arbitrary inferences in the latter. The Lazarus story variation above, coupled with the stories of Jesus's healings and exorcisms in the gospel, lead him to a number of bizarre conclusions: Jesus was a practitioner of magic, not miracles, who also used hypnotic techniques on His followers. Baptism was a water baptism administered by Jesus to chosen disciples by night. The costume for the disciple was a linen cloth worn over the naked body. Each disciple was possessed by Jesus's spirit and so united with Jesus. One with Him, he would participate by hallucination in Jesus's ascent into the heavens, enter the kingdom of God, and thereby be set free from the laws ordained for the lower world.

To be sure, Dr. Smith tempers such statements with a lavish sprinkling of “possibly,” “may have,” and “probably,” but why would one draw such wild conclusions—some with erotic implications—from a modest

fragment that makes no such claims? But worse, a number of scholars, Dr. Craig Evans of Houston Baptist University in particular, have concluded that the entire “discovery” is a hoax and that Smith himself is the hoaxer. Themes such as the mysteries of the kingdom of God, secrecy, forbidden sexual activities, omitted Markan material, and Clement’s *Stromata* appear both in Smith’s previous scholarly articles and—how coincidental—also in the supposed Clementine material. Even the circumstances of the “Mar Saba discovery” have several parallels in the contemporary scholarly world. Finally, scientific testing of the paper and ink employed show not an ancient, but a modern, provenance.

### A Married Jesus?

No mother anxious to find a bride for her aging bachelor son could match the enthusiasm of scholars in trying to find a wife for Jesus. Most of them seem sure it was Mary Magdalene, even though there is no proof whatever that Jesus married her or anyone else. Later, when Saint Paul was talking about his own bachelorhood, he said, “Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas?” (1 Cor. 9:5 NIV). Had Jesus been married, Paul would have said “as our Lord and Master did.” Yet this has not deterred authors from bending history as they wish.

In 1982 the book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* was published by a trio of British authors, Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh, with the intriguing subtitle *The Secret History of Christ and the Shocking Legacy of the Grail*. In their scenario, Jesus survived Calvary and sailed off to France with his wife, Mary Magdalene, where their daughter married into the Merovingian dynasty—so evidently, there are people with Jesus’s genes walking around Paris today! Does this all sound familiar? Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* should come to mind. In this remarkable book, every time Jesus, the church, or Christianity is mentioned, Brown offers false information in whole or in part. After reading it, I wondered why the three authors didn’t sue Brown for plagiarism. In fact, they did! In court, however, the judge dismissed the case while rapping Brown’s knuckles. The authors had the audacity of having their book published as nonfiction,

which was hyped by the publisher as “more revealing than any fiction” and “extraordinarily provocative, meticulously researched”—of which neither claim can be justified.

Most recently, Karen King, a theologian at Harvard Divinity School, translated a small Coptic document (the size of a business card) in which Jesus refers to “my wife, Mary.” Naming it the “Gospel of Jesus’s Wife,” King showed the fragment to a select handful of media outlets just prior to presenting her findings to a scholarly meeting in Rome in September 2012. It was judged to be a forgery almost from the start by numerous scholars, who pointed out errors in its Coptic grammar as well as wording lifted from the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*. Nonetheless, King persisted in a second round of publicity for this alleged discovery. Ariel Sabar, a determined reporter from *The Atlantic* magazine, decided to investigate the fragment’s chain of ownership. He determined that the person who supplied the document to King was a con man who had studied ancient Coptic. After reading Sabar’s 2016 article, King conceded that the fragment could be a forgery, but said that she needed more “scientific evidence.”<sup>22</sup>

### The Jesus Seminar

Beyond individual radical authors, there have also been groups of sceptics such as the Jesus Seminar, sixty to seventy radical theologians who met twice a year and voted on whether Jesus could actually have said the things credited to Him in the Gospels. The group voted with beads: red, if He most likely did say what was ascribed to Him; pink, if there is a chance that He may have said what He is claimed to have said; gray, if it was unlikely that He said what was claimed; or black, if it was impossible for Him to have said it.

Such appalling procedures have been strongly denounced by the scholarly community. Resorting to headline-making claims to provoke conservative Christians, the Seminar, ever since its founding by Robert Funk in 1985, proceeded with a highly biased methodology which intended to liberate the “historical Jesus” from His bondage by Nicene Christianity. Because of the sensationally provocative reports in the

media, the group succeeded in getting much attention in the decade to follow, but this has diminished since Funk's death in 2005.<sup>3</sup>

### A Roman Invention?

One of the most absurd books on Jesus ever written came from the pen of Joseph Atwill in his 2005 book *Caesar's Messiah*, in which he argues that Christianity was invented by first-century court historians for the Roman Flavian emperors (AD 69–96) as a counterpoise to Judaism. This is a preposterous concept proposed by someone who obviously is unfamiliar with Roman history. In fact, matters were quite the opposite. Judaism was a legitimate religion in the Roman Empire. Christians, on the other hand, were despised by the Romans from the first century on as a noxious cult which they tried to persecute to extinction—hardly something they would have invented. In trying to promote his book, Atwill indicated his concern that Christians would abandon their faith because of it. He need not have worried. This bizarre misinterpretation of Jesus and His times was dead on arrival.

Another author, Australian Barbara Thiering, shares with Atwill the dubious distinction of having published probably the more irrational book on Jesus ever written (unless that dubious distinction should go to John Allegro and his sacred mushroom). In her 1992 book *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, she transferred Jesus's public ministry from Galilee and Judea to the Dead Sea area, totally upsetting the actual geography of the area and place names of the region. But there's more! The Jesus of Barbara Thiering performed no miracles; earned the title "the Wicked Priest" mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls; married Mary Magdalene, whom he later divorced; was crucified but taken down alive from the cross; later accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys; married Lydia, the seller of purple cloth in Philippi (Acts 16); fathered three children; and finally died in obscurity in Rome.<sup>4</sup>

No shred of evidence in any ancient record supports any such ridiculous events and characterization of Jesus. One must wonder why this book was published in the first place. And yet, Thiering received much media attention when her incredible "reconstruction" first appeared.



### Did Jesus Really Exist?

Probably the most ridiculous of all misinterpretations of Jesus is the claim that He never even existed as a historical figure, an idea implicit in several of the previous portrayals. It is based on the mistaken claim that the name of Jesus does not appear in other nonbiblical records from the first century. Those who make such a claim are only flaunting their ignorance, since the name of Jesus does indeed appear in the works of celebrated Roman, Greek, and Jewish historians of the era, as we shall see in detail later in this book where it is more appropriate. Even the venerable *National Geographic* conceded in a December 2017 article on “The Search for the Real Jesus” that while some outspoken sceptics assert that Jesus never existed, it is not a view shared by scholars and especially archaeologists, “whose work tends to bring flights of fancy down to literal earth.”<sup>5</sup>

One thing, however, that all exotic revisions of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth have in common: the authors have discarded the New Testament historical accounts as their primary source and have then tried to fill the resulting vacuum with their own miserable maunderings and fictional reconstructions.

This is not to say that orthodox Christians are in any way anti-scholarship, nor that they should cherish a simplistic and closed view of Jesus. Hardly!

The negativity expressed thus far in this chapter should not suggest that all current scholarship on Jesus is bad. Literary and archaeological discoveries are continually improving our knowledge of the world in which Jesus lived, while a growing sophistication in our understanding of the biblical records is the happy harvest of labors by a legion of dedicated scholars, Christian and non-Christian alike, who are scrupulously honest in their use of historical and linguistic evidence. Only because of their efforts, in fact, it is possible to blow a full, shrill whistle on the erroneous theories cited above. Their names may not be garnering sensational space in the media, but they easily prove that there is a fair, scholarly way to find out who Jesus is. This book is one such attempt.

## Notes

1. “The Secret Gospel of Mark”: For further demonstration of the hoax, see Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Manuscripts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2020), 19–25.
2. Ariel Sabar, “The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus’s Wife,” *Atlantic*, July/August 2016, 64–78.
3. The Jesus Seminar: For an accurate critique of the Jesus Seminar, see Luke Timothy Johnson’s *The Real Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 10–20.
4. Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 80.
5. Kristin Romey, “The Search for the Real Jesus,” *National Geographic*, December 2017, 42.

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## The Sources

THE PRIMARY SOURCE for the life of Jesus is a small library that includes four brief ancient biographies, a record of the earliest church, and the correspondence of Paul and other early church leaders. This, of course, is our New Testament, which opens with the Gospels, the book of Acts, and the letters of early church leaders Paul, Peter, John, and others—all of which have been the subject of much debate across the centuries. Here is a brief summary of these sources.

### Matthew

Traditionally placed first among the Gospels, yet like the other gospel accounts, Matthew's gospel is anonymous—a phenomenon not unusual in ancient documents. Perhaps the authors desired anonymity so as not to detract from the great story they were recording or to avoid possible persecution. Each of the gospel writers, however, left clues as to the authorship in their works, as we shall see. These, coupled with strong testimony from the earliest church fathers, provide sufficient evidence that the traditional authors' names are correct.

Matthew, also called Levi, was one of Jesus's twelve disciples. He had been a tax collector in Galilee, and his writing reflects mathematic interests such as numbers, wages, weights, and measures.

Matthew seems to have written an earlier version of his gospel in

Aramaic, before composing the Greek version. As the target audience was his fellow Jews, his purpose for writing the gospel was to show Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies, as witnessed by his repeated use of the phrase that Jesus did such and such “so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled, as the [prophet’s name] wrote.” Jesus as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy was in fact the first part of every Christian sermon preached in the earliest history of the church, according to the book of Acts. The question as to when Matthew was composed, as well as the other gospels, will be dealt with later in this chapter.

### Mark

Mark’s favorite adverb is “immediately,” perhaps because of the brevity of the scroll available to him. The shortest of the four gospels—only sixteen chapters—Mark is also written for a Jewish-Christian audience. According to earliest references from the church fathers across the whole of the Mediterranean world, the name of Mark has always been attached to this gospel. No other name was ever offered. Eusebius of Caesarea, “the father of church history,” reported that Christians in Rome asked Mark, who is always associated with Peter, to compose a record of the life of Jesus. He did so under Peter’s direction and approval, and the gospel itself mentions Peter more often than the other evangelists do. Today one wishes that a longer scroll had been available to Mark, since his gospel was probably the earliest record of Jesus. Matthew and Luke may have relied on Mark’s gospel in writing their own gospel accounts, which also contain additional sayings of Jesus not recorded in Mark. The similar format and language of Matthew, Mark, and Luke gave rise to the term “Synoptic Gospels” (*syn*, “together with”; *optic*, “seeing”; thus “seeing together”). These three are a contrast to the fourth gospel by the apostle John, which takes a more theological and indeed philosophical, approach to the life of Jesus.

We have additional information on Mark (also called John Mark) in the New Testament. His mother may have owned a house in Jerusalem with an upper room which Jesus and the disciples frequented, including for the celebration of the Last Supper. Mark also seems to be the youth

who escaped the captors of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, when they seized his garment and he fled naked (Mark 14:51–52). This incident has little or nothing to do with the main narrative of Jesus’s arrest but serves to identify the youth who evaded capture by Jesus’s opponents in the garden. This “throwaway” incident would never have been forgotten if it had happened to Mark himself.

Later on, Mark will again appear in the book of Acts as the cousin of Barnabas who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, making landfall on Cyprus. Mark soon left the other two after they landed in Asia Minor at Perga. Paul was angry enough at what he deemed a desertion that he refused to take Mark along on his second journey or any future travels. Later in Rome, however, the two became reconciled, as we shall see.

Unfortunately, the last verses of Mark 16—the end of the gospel—are missing in the important and oldest manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> Although some scholars argue that this is not the case, verse 16:8 reads “for [the women] were afraid,” a rather strange way to end the gospel. A “better ending” was added by later church leaders. Yet the references to drinking poison or handling snakes as miraculous defenses for the early Christians mentioned in these later editions seems instead to be tempting God and are unworthy of serious consideration. And they are not in the earliest manuscripts of Mark. In any case, chapter 16 is the end of Mark’s scroll, and if not rewound, a chapter 17 and/or others may have appeared at the end of the scroll. They could easily have been torn off, much as the paper cover jacket on books today can be damaged or torn.

### Luke

The target audience of Luke’s gospel is the Gentile world, and the reason may be obvious: Luke himself was a Gentile—in fact, the only Gentile author of two books (Luke and Acts) in the sixty-six-book Semitic library known as the Bible. He was a physician who joined the apostle Paul on his second mission journey at Troas in the northeastern corner of the Aegean Sea. Luke records his entry into Paul’s history with a subtle change in style: up to that point in Acts, he uses the third person singular or plural (“*he* preached,” “*they* went”) to record Paul’s travels; but,

upon leaving Troas (Acts 16:11), it is “*we* set sail.” Later in Acts Luke has additional passages beginning in the first-person plural, showing that he was an eyewitness to Paul’s mission travels from Acts 16 and following. The question of *when* Luke wrote his books will be covered shortly.

The principal theme in both his gospel and the book of Acts is the universality of the faith. In the gospel, Luke tells of Jesus’s visits to Samaria and other non-Jewish geographical locations. In the book of Acts, he does the same for Paul and his missionary journey to Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. Luke demonstrates that Gentiles were also included in the divine plan of salvation, which is of extraordinary importance for the future of Christianity (which remains predominately Gentile to the present day).

Luke’s gospel is also important because it covers Jesus’s life after the resurrection, his ascension, and the details of earliest Christianity in Jerusalem. In addition, his gospel provides the most comprehensive coverage of Jesus’s life from the nativity to the ascension, even including some data on his youth which is absent from the other gospels. Most meticulous of the evangelists in terms of time and place, Luke regularly casts an anchor out into the mainstream of Greco-Roman history in correlating the life of Christ and the roots of the church. More than anyone else, Luke shows that Christian origins are not simply “sacred” history but are part and parcel of the ancient world itself.

### John

Because so many people in the New Testament are named John, an almost endless debate among scholars has arisen over whether or not this is John the apostle, John the elder from Ephesus, or any number of other suggestions such as Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. These scholarly disputes are hardly necessary since evidence from earliest Christianity supports the author of this gospel as the disciple John, son of Zebedee. This John, along with his brother James and fishing partner Peter, was a key disciple in the inner circle of leadership among Jesus’s disciples.

Toward the end of the gospel, the author identifies himself as the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (John 20:2). The early church agreed that

this was the disciple John, and no other name has been attached to this gospel. Faithful to the crucified Jesus's directive that John care for His mother, John took Mary with him to Ephesus, where he served as bishop of the church until his death at an advanced age. At Ephesus, one of John's students became bishop of Smyrna: the great martyr, Polycarp. Polycarp, in turn, was the teacher of Irenaeus, the great defender of the faith at Lyon, France, who affirmed that John the apostle was indeed the author of the fourth gospel—a fact delivered from his intellectual grandfather himself!

As did Luke, John includes the Gentile world in his readership as witnessed in the philosophical introduction, "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Here John uses the Greek term *logos* ("word"), one of the most meaningful words in the Greek language. John gives us not only the facts of what Jesus did and taught, but also the vast behind-the-scenes story of the divine/human individual named Jesus. The mystery of how this is possible is revealed in this gospel.

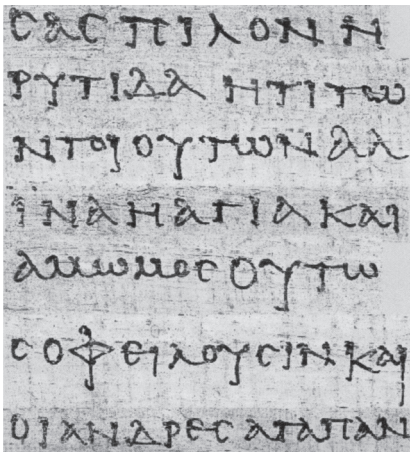
More than half of the gospel of John reports the events in the last week of Jesus's earthly life, with impressive detail on the crucial events from Palm Sunday to Jesus's resurrection one week later.

### How the New Testament Documents Were Written

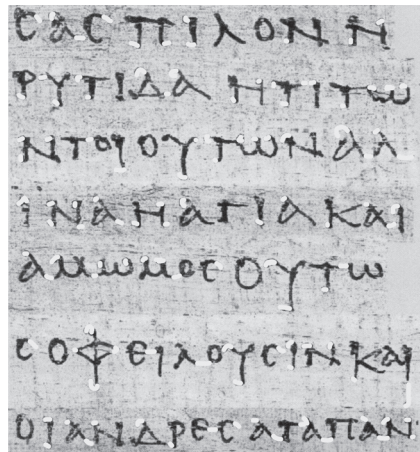
The first editions of our New Testament were, of course, the autographs, written by the evangelists themselves. They were written on sheets of papyrus invented in neighboring Egypt. A tan to light brown paper, it was made by cutting stalks of papyrus growing along the banks of the Nile River; wetting and crisscrossing them; and finally pressing the sheets dry. The scribe would write on them with ink made of lampblack and water and then glue the separate pages together into a scroll. Later, the scroll pages were cut apart and glued on the side into a proto-book form which often contained capital Greek letters throughout. These were the great uncials, the earliest books written. Some centuries later, small lettering was reintroduced in a format called "minuscule."

The holy grail among biblical scholars would be to find a first-century Greek manuscript, since this would be a first-generation copy of the

autograph themselves. And perhaps this has already happened. A former student of mine, Curt Fletemier, alerted me to the work of a Korean paleographer, Kim Young Kyu, who has reexamined papyrus P46, a part of the Chester Beatty Papyrus. These were first discovered and collected in the 1930s by Alfred Chester Beatty, a wealthy mining magnate from the United States.<sup>2</sup> Kim\* compared it to other early manuscripts assigned to the second century, a common catchall for early manuscripts at Oxford University that are difficult to date. P46, however, has many distinctive traits, Kim noted. Doing the most thorough analyses ever performed on the document and comparing it to more than one hundred other manuscripts, Kim found decisive evidence that P46 must have been produced during the early portion of Emperor Domitian's reign, around AD 85–90. He found that the scribal style in the document is consistent with first-century manuscripts but inconsistent with second-century documents. The scroll contains ligatures (connecting strokes), finials (little “footies” at the ends of strokes), and embellishments (decorative hooks and swirls at the ends of strokes; see adjoining images of comparisons of a segment from P46 the Beatty papyrus [Ephesians 5:27f.] with adornments just mentioned, and the same images with the flourishes in white contrast). These flourishes were slowly dying out in the latter half of the first century and were almost completely gone by the early portion



P46



P66



of the second century AD. Thus, many or most of such addenda would have disappeared in the second-century copying, in the usual trajectory of “the later, the simpler.”

When Kim reported this to the academic community, however, he encountered hostility and blistering attacks. Why? Simply because academics had made up their minds that the originals, having been written after AD 70, would not have been copied this early. If validated by future scholarship, how very sad that the quest for truth may have been intercepted by closed minds! Currently, however, other gospel fragments, claimed to date back to the first century, are being examined.

### Attacking the New Testament Text

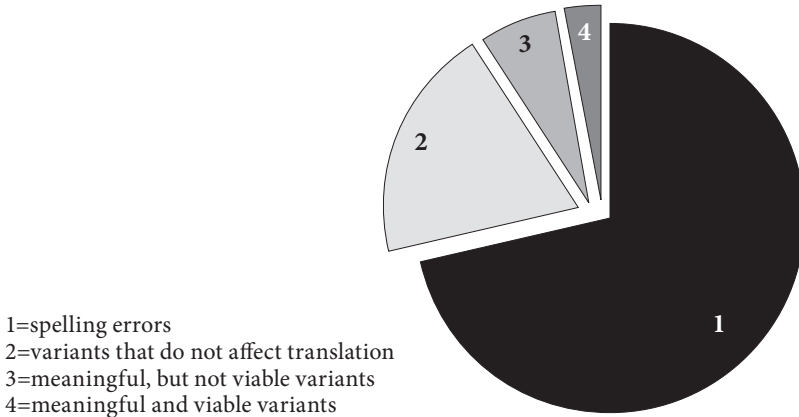
The most recent assaults on Christianity charge that there are so many different variants among New Testament texts that they hardly resemble anything from antiquity, and so Christianity must hardly reflect what happened in the first century. Professor Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has built a virtual cottage industry in leading the charge from this sector of skepticism. His book *Forged* makes a totally incredible claim that the four gospels were forgeries because they were titled with names that could not have been those of the authors. This is hardly the case, since anonymity is not forgery; and the Gospels are very reliable, as will be demonstrated.

Although first schooled in a very conservative Bible college, Ehrman today has published a series of books, such as *Misquoting Jesus*, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, and others, which underlie his thesis that the variations in all of the biblical manuscripts make for an unreliable basis for Christianity. This all, of course, becomes a mountain out of a molehill. Almost 75 percent of these variants are simply different spellings of words, especially proper names. Not one variant impinges in any way on the doctrine or practice of Christianity. Other variants include word order, punctuation, vowels, and commentary phrases by copyists, which are regularly excluded from modern translations by textual criticism.

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\* Koreans place the surname first; hence, Kim is the family name.

### Quality of Variants Among New Testament Manuscripts



But why are there so many variants? Simply because more manuscript copies of the New Testament have come down to us today than for any other literary work from antiquity—by a vast margin. The chart above shows the incredible differences.<sup>3</sup>

With so many copies and copyists involved, obviously there will be more variance. Thousands of inconsequential differences that are the norm in ancient sources hardly impugn the principal sources of Christianity.

At the time of the King James translation of the Bible in 1611, scholars had only six ancient texts to use as the basis for the translation. By 1870, with the publication of the Revised Version of the Bible, there were two thousand manuscripts available. But today, with a worldwide search for biblical manuscripts, the number has swelled to more than seven thousand and growing. This is all for the good. Do the math, rather than impugn the reliability of the manuscripts because of inconsequential variants which are bound to arise from so many different copyists. There are far more copies of the New Testament or portions thereof than for any other document—sacred or secular—from the ancient world. The record for copies from antiquity would otherwise go to Homer for his

*Iliad*, for which there are only six hundred! With other ancient authors, there would be no problem whatever, since only one copy has survived from the ancient world!

### When Were the New Testament Documents Written?

Here again scholarly skeptics and radical theologians, especially in Germany, have misled us. Ferdinand Christian Baur (d. 1850) of the University of Tübingen held that the gospel of John was probably written around AD 175 because it contained opposites such as war versus peace, light versus darkness, and love versus hate, which he deemed late Hellenistic ideas. But when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered (from 1946 to 1956), one of the first documents translated was a Jewish scroll from 200 BC entitled *The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness*. Obviously, the use of opposite concepts was not limited to the second century AD.

Similarly, Rudolf Bultmann (d. 1976) of the University of Marburg was famous for his insistence on “demythologizing” the Bible—that is, cutting out any mention of miracles in Scripture since these are impossible then and now, he asserted. This, he claimed, would make the Bible more acceptable to modern readers. The Gospels must have been written many years after the events which they reported, he claimed, during which time the faith of the writers overcame the facts of what actually happened.

C. S. Lewis (d. 1963) quickly refuted this assertion since, as an Oxford professor of English literature, he found that mythological elements take much longer to develop in literary epics than a mere century or two. Further, the earliest writings about Christ were not the Gospels but the letters of St. Paul. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he reports what most scholars believe to be the earliest creed of the church, testifying to Jesus’s miraculous return from the dead. Paul wrote this letter only eighteen to nineteen years after Jesus’s crucifixion (1 Cor. 15). No time for mythological development here!

It has long been the habit of scholars to insist that the Gospels must have been written after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year of AD 70. Why? Simply because Jesus predicted the fall of Jerusalem on his

way to the cross, and critical scholars cannot accept the idea of Jesus's prophetic foreknowledge. Not questioning the accuracy of Jesus's ability to prophesy, but to show how faulty this reasoning is, one hardly need involve the miraculous in this argument. Any astute observer of the time—even without miraculous powers—could have predicted the fall of Jerusalem, since there already had been thirteen uprisings against the Romans after their conquest of Judea in 63 BC, which would lead to a final conquest by an impatient Rome. Still, this reasoning has prevailed in the scholarly community to the present day; nonetheless, the evidence for an earlier dating of all four gospels is overwhelming.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple were horrific catastrophes for Jews of that day and ever since. Mourning over those events still takes place at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. No Jew could fail to report this horror or to have been seared by it if he wrote after the event. And yet there is not a word about it in any of the Gospels! Clearly, it had not yet happened.

Now consider Matthew and his habit of prophecy-fulfillment couplets throughout his gospel (i.e., “Jesus did this so that what the prophet says might be fulfilled”). When Matthew reported the weeping of Jesus's followers as He carried His cross to Golgotha, Jesus responded that they should not weep for Him but for themselves and what would happen to them. Why did Matthew not complete the couplet by adding that our Lord's prophecy was indeed fulfilled when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem? Simply because it had not yet happened! In all the Gospels, the Jerusalem temple was a beehive of activity, especially during Passover. How could any of the evangelists describe this at a time when the temple was a heap of ashes—if the Gospels were written *after* AD 70?

Jesus's opponents among the Pharisees and Sadducees were very active in their campaign against Him; they hadn't been captured or killed by the Romans as was the truth after AD 70. In other words, the entire historical background of the Gospels all but shouts that these events had not yet taken place. Admittedly, these are arguments from silence but as scholars say, “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” Ordinarily, this would be a weaker form of evidence, but the silence in this case is stentorian.

And there are further examples. Why is the martyrdom of James the Just of Jerusalem (Jesus's half brother who became the first Christian bishop of Jerusalem) *not* recorded anywhere in any gospel? Even Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, mentions this tragedy in the events of AD 62.

Luke reports the martyrdom of early Christian leaders, especially in the book of Acts. Why did he not then report the vast numbers of Christians martyred by Nero after the great fire of AD 64? Again, the refrain: "It hadn't happened yet."

More scholars have become sensitive to this issue. For example, David Noel Freedman, editor of the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, and Henry Innes MacAdam are among other critical scholars today who are revising their views toward an early dating of gospel authorship.<sup>4</sup> Since Acts is Luke's second book, then obviously his gospel comes earlier, back to the early 60s at least. This explains the absence of any mention of Paul's trial before Nero or a possible fourth missionary journey after his first hearing before the Roman emperor and acquittal. Again, it is obviously now high time to give the post-AD 70 gospel authorship hypothesis a respectful and decent burial.

### Are There "Lost Gospels"?

"Lost gospels" are neither lost nor gospels in any credible sense. A better term would be "retrieved forgeries," because that is exactly what they are. One of the worst recent frauds on the reading public is the idea that there were many different Christianities in the ancient world, and it is only by some fate that the traditional four gospels were chosen, and not even the best ones. A corrected statement of the previous would be: there were many different sectarian deviations from the Orthodox faith in the ancient world, much as there are today. Writing under the slogan "never let the facts get in the way of a good story," radical historians and theologians who should know better succumbed to the temptation of becoming novelists. So it was also in the ancient world.

Another falsehood promoted in today's media is that "the church doesn't want you to know about or read any of the other gospels that didn't make the cut because their content would doom Judaism and

Christianity.” This is totally false since the best way of defending the traditional versions of either faith is simply to tell the reader, “Please, go ahead and read any of these apocryphal (from the Greek “to hide”) gospels—that alone will convince you of their ridiculous claim to authenticity!” All of these retrieved apocryphal works have glaring errors against true and acceptable historical facts of antiquity, as well as an overzealous use of the miraculous, such as Jesus speaking well-crafted sentences in the cradle; curing or restoring to life a childhood chum when he fell off of a roof and died; resorting to negative miracles such as cursing a village in Galilee with blindness when they scorned Him; or killing a player who blocked Him in an early version of soccer in Galilee. There are also pointless parables, grotesque warping of comments by Jesus, gnostic terminology (such as firmaments, demiurges, Sophia as goddess of wisdom), and a host of other apocalyptic items.

Gnosticism was an early and persistent heresy in the church which tried to infect orthodoxy. Typically, a gnostic teacher would unveil secret theological aberrations to his disciples, but no two of these “secret revelations” ever matched the teachings of other gnostics.

The sectarians were especially prominent in Egypt. The church was aware of Gnosticism ever since Irenaeus of Lyon cited it in his book *Against Heresies* (c. 180). He wrote that a noxious cult had developed named for the world’s first murderer, Cain. The Cainites had published a ridiculous work called the Judas Gospel. The church had only the name of his work but not its content until very recently, when it was discovered and translated. Judas becomes Jesus’s “friend,” not His traitor, who was only trying to deliver Jesus from the defects of human flesh!

This was all published with great ballyhoo and, again, suggested that the New Testament had it all wrong in characterizing Judas as a traitor. But let any reader decide that. Search on “Judas Gospel,” and print it out; it’s only twelve pages (but only if you wish to waste paper!). Most of it is gnostic gibberish. One of the few normal sentences in this apocryphon has Judas telling Jesus, “I know where you have come from, Jesus. You came from the immortal realm of Barbelo.” Not Bethlehem, mind you, but Barbelo. There is no such place; the nearest I found was the horse that won the Kentucky Derby some years ago, Barbaro.

Only one of the gnostic gospels offers normal prose, namely the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*. It is not a regular gospel, but 114 supposed sayings of Jesus, with no narrative framework—hence, not a gospel at all. And yet the Jesus Seminar had the audacity to include Thomas as the fifth gospel in their version of the New Testament—a clear example of straining at the gnat and swallowing the camel. These are the gospels that were truly forged, as Bart Ehrman should have insisted, rather than Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John! Once again, a simple reading of any of this unnecessary material will quickly show any fair-minded reader the glaring errors in all of the alternative sources urged by skeptical critics instead of clear, logical Christian sources in the New Testament and the early church.

### Formation of the Canon

One of the most important tasks of the early church was to separate the true from the false gospels. The church fathers were not naïve, and they carefully set up criteria for authenticity as to which were genuine New Testament materials and which were not. Three important criteria covering their decisions were:

1. *Apostolicity*. The document must have been written by an eyewitness or a near eyewitness. The latter was to cover Luke, for example, who was an eyewitness only to the events after joining Paul during his second missionary journey at Troas. The earlier material, including his gospel, Luke most probably gained from the apostles and Jesus's mother, Mary, during the two years Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea.
2. *Orthodoxy*. The theology in the document must reflect and coordinate with the other authentic Christian texts—for example, teaching that Jesus had a true human body rather than that he was some nonphysical apparition.
3. *Catholicity*. The word “catholic” is a Greek term meaning “according to the whole.” This means that the church, both Greek-speaking in the eastern Roman Empire and Latin-speaking in the Western Empire, was in accord with the central teachings of the

faith. Differences were more in practice rather than doctrine. For example, one of the great instances of disagreement in the earliest church was over when to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. The Western church held to a specific day (Sunday), while the Eastern church held to a date (Nisan 14 of the Jewish calendar), much as we are inconsistent today when we celebrate Christmas on a date (December 25), and Easter on a day (the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox).

4. Another possible standard was wide liturgical use in churches both east and west.

Finally, after a core of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the book of Acts, and the collection of Paul's writings, the other books that constitute the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were agreed upon—and so has it remained from late antiquity to the present day.

#### Notes

1. End of Mark's Gospel: More material must have appeared at the end of the scroll since Mark refers to the resurrection of Jesus in earlier passages.
2. Beatty Papyrus: For a discussion of other second-century materials that could derive from the first century, see Curt Fletemier, *The Divine Pen Strokes* (Nashville: Westbow, 2018).
3. Pie chart of textual variations courtesy of J. Ed. Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 63.
4. David N. Freedman and Henry I. MacAdam, "Acts 28:15–31: The Critical Witness to Early Dating of the Synoptic Gospels," *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 6 (2008): 15–38.