

THE RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLICAL SOURCES

Jesus the Christ's provision for the New Testament

In this Appendix we look at the reliability of the biblical sources, and especially the reliability of the New Testament writers. Christians believe that the Old Testament was given to prophets—men chosen and inspired by God to bring His message at particular times to address particular circumstances facing His chosen people. Often however, their writings also contain a hidden message, which today we might call a 'source code' that points towards Jesus the Messiah. Elsewhere in this book about the birth of Christ we have considered in detail some of the Old Testament prophecies which point directly or obliquely to the birth of Jesus. But for now we look principally at the New Testament record. Could it be argued that the New Testament writers had a particular message that they wanted to convey, and that they were so enthusiastic about this man Jesus whom they followed, that their writings must be treated with caution as a sort of well-meaning propaganda? Could it be argued that their writings were therefore not inspired by God?

Bible believing Christians do not fear biblical criticism or honest and open questioning. Indeed, such questioning can in itself lead to a fuller understanding of biblical truth both for the questioner and those who seek to answer the question! Before looking at the New Testament witnesses, it is instructive to look at the Lord Jesus' own attitude to the 'Bible' of His day, what we now call the Old Testament. John Stott's excellent standard reference work *Understanding the Bible* contains a full discussion of the authority of the Bible (see especially chapter 6). Stott makes, in some detail, a number of points about the Lord Jesus' own submission to the Scriptures, summarised here:

1. **Jesus submitted to the Old Testament in his personal conduct:** He countered the temptations of the devil when He was in the wilderness with an appropriate biblical quotation,
2. **Jesus submitted to the Old Testament in the fulfilment of his mission:** Jesus seems to have drawn much of his understanding

of His role as Messiah from the Scriptures and saw himself as the Son of David, the Son of Man and Isaiah's suffering servant.

3. Jesus submitted to the Old Testament in his controversies: "He found himself engaged in continuous debate with the religious leaders of his day. Whenever there was a difference of opinion between them, he regarded Scripture as the only court of appeal. 'What is written in the Law?' he would ask. 'How do you read it?' (Luke 10:26). Again, 'Haven't you read this in Scripture...' (Mark 12:10). One of his chief criticisms of his contemporaries concerned their disrespect for Scripture. The Pharisees added to it and the Sadducees subtracted from it."¹

4. There is no example of Christ contradicting the divine origin of the Scriptures.

As John Stott concludes "All the available evidence confirms that Jesus Christ assented in his mind and submitted in his life to the authority of Old Testament Scripture. Is it not inconceivable that his followers should have a lower view of it than he?"

The Lord Jesus' way of 'endorsing' the New Testament was entirely different from his way of endorsing the Old. After all, none of the New Testament books had been written by the time of Christ's death and resurrection. John Stott again tackles the question in detail, with a number of clear points emerging. Jesus foresaw the need for New Testament Scriptures corresponding to the Old. He therefore provided authoritative scribes of Christ's redemption and judgement of the world. The Lord Jesus carefully chose, appointed, trained and authorised twelve apostles to be his ultimate witnesses (see Luke 6:12-13). These apostles had a fourfold uniqueness:

1. They had a *personal call* and authorisation by Jesus (e.g. Gal 1:1).
2. They had an *eyewitness experience* of Christ (e.g. John 15:27; 2 Peter 1:16-21).
3. They had an *extraordinary inspiration* by the Holy Spirit. Whilst the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to every child of God, the ministry of the Holy Spirit which the Lord promised his apostles was unique:

“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.... I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. When he, the Spirit of Truth, comes, he will guide you in all truth...” (John 14:25-26 and John 16:12-13).

4. They had the *power to work miracles*, one purpose of which was to authenticate their apostolic commission and message (e.g. Heb 2:3-4).

As Stott notes: “When in the fourth century the church came finally to settle which books should be included in the canon of Scripture and which excluded, the test they applied was whether a book came from the apostles. That is, was it written by an apostle? If not, did it nevertheless emanate from the circle of the apostles and carry the endorsement of their authority? It is important to add this, for not every New Testament book was written by an apostle.”²

The time delay from the events to the written records

We have already seen in Appendix 4 that the translations we have today are extremely accurate, based as they are on early documents. But has the New Testament been tampered with in the succeeding centuries? Scholars are in a much better position to evaluate the reliability of the New Testament documents than they are with any other ancient book. The interval between Thucydides’ writing of his *History* and the earliest manuscripts we have of it is some 1,500 years. In the case of the Roman historian Tacitus it is 800 years. These time gaps do not unduly worry classical scholars, who accept the manuscript tradition as being broadly reliable. The reason why the question is of far greater importance with regard to the early Christian documents is because of the issues at stake. As Michael Green says in his excellent book *World on the Run*, “The Christian material is so challenging and disturbing that it would be very convenient if we could write off the reliability of the text. But that is just what we cannot do.”³

In complete contrast to the comparatively few manuscripts

available from the first century classical authors, there are literally hundreds of the New Testament, written in a variety of languages and found all over the ancient world. There are, it is true, a number of variants in the documents available, but, as Michael Green points out, two things can be stated with absolute certainty:

1. There is no single point of Christian doctrine which depends on a disputed reading.
2. The text is so certain that that anybody who tried to make ‘conjectural emendations’ – a common practice when dealing with ancient manuscripts – would, in Green’s words, “be laughed out of court”.

It might be added that our available manuscripts are not separated by gaps of hundreds of years as are many other trusted ancient works. Certainly, all four Gospels are available in papyrus records written before AD 200, little over a century after the originals. There is a fragment of the Gospel of John discovered in Egypt which has been dated as early as AD 125. A document known as *The Unknown Gospel* and written before AD 150 and drawing heavily on the four canonical Gospels, indicates the position which those four Gospels had already achieved by that date. An early heretic, Valentinus, whose *Gospel of Truth* is thought to have been written about AD 130, quoted the New Testament writings extensively. As Michael Green notes: “...you need to quote the acknowledged stuff if, like Valentinus, you are keen to insert your own heresy!”

The most recent research at the time of preparing these studies places the Gospel of Matthew even earlier. In December 1994 Carsten Thiede, a German theological scholar who as deputy director of research at the Centre of the German Institute for Education and Knowledge in Paderborn, undertook fresh work on the ‘Jesus Papyri’ at Magdalen College (part of Oxford University) and, on the basis of exhaustive papyrology (study and dating of papyrus), comparative handwriting analysis and laser scanning microscopy, has dated the Jesus Papyri to 60 AD - 30 AD. The Jesus Papyri contain parts of Matthew Chapter 26 —the story of the anointing of Jesus with alabaster perfume by the woman in

Simon's home, the betrayal by Judas Iscariot, and part of the last supper. Part of Carsten Thiede's thesis rests on the fact that in cave 4 at Qumran (where the 'Dead Sea Scrolls' were discovered) the handwriting in one document found there closely resembles that of the Jesus Papyrus. Since Qumran was overrun by the Romans in 68 AD, this suggests that the Jesus Papyrus was written before 68 AD.

A full explanation of Carsten Thiede's work is beyond the scope of this Appendix but his work, if correct, is of considerable importance. It means that Matthew's Gospel is clearly an eyewitness account—in other words an account written by someone who was a first-hand eyewitness of what he wrote about. This in turn means that the view held by some scholars that, for example, the sermon on the mount is only a compilation of 'the essence' of Jesus' teachings, is almost certainly wrong. The sermon on the mount is much more likely to be an accurate, verbatim report of the sermon as preached by Jesus.

Certainly, then, by the end of the first century, the New Testament was written and well on the way to being collected. From the beginning it was considered to be authoritative—so much so that early heretics knew they must quote it extensively in order to persuade people with their teachings. (In this we might find two modern equivalents: the cult of the Russellites, better known as the Jehovahs Witnesses, and the cult of Joseph Smith, better known as the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (or Mormons). Both these cults use heavily amended versions of the Bible in addition to their own 'inspired' writings). Of much more importance, at the end of the first century the Christians began to quote the New Testament with the same reverence that they gave to the Old Testament Scriptures.

The time delay between the dates of the original writing of the New Testament books and the earliest available copies of them are so small as to be, in terms of ancient documents, negligible. It might be objected, however, that although the time lag in documentary terms is insignificant, in human terms it is rather more significant. Could the witnesses have remembered the

details with the necessary precision to give us a reliable record? Apart from the possibility that Jesus may well have taught his disciples in the manner of a Jewish rabbi, perhaps involving them in memorising certain parts of His teaching, it should be said that His use of parables and other memorable formulations would have assisted a tenacious oriental memory, used to the oral tradition of teaching, to remember precisely the words used. Furthermore, He promised that the Holy Spirit would stimulate the apostles' memory (John 14:25-26). The documents we have, it can be said with great confidence, are substantially as they were written —and in this, once again, Christians see the providential hand of God at work.

The reliability of the New Testament witnesses

In preparing this section, the author has again drawn upon the work of John Stott. His book *The Authentic Jesus* contains an excellent and clearly argued chapter about the reliability of the Gospel and other New Testament writers.⁴ Our knowledge of Jesus comes almost exclusively from the New Testament, although there are a few independent references to him in Roman and Jewish literature (e.g. see Appendix 2 on Josephus, the Jewish historian). It is obviously important, therefore, that we can have confidence in the New Testament writers. Stott makes a number of valuable points:

1. **The Gospel writers had a serious purpose, namely to be witnesses:** The New Testament Scriptures contain the record and interpretation of Jesus given by the apostolic eyewitnesses and those associated with them in the early church. The apostle John's statement about his Gospel is equally applicable to all the rest of the New Testament. He said that the words and works of Jesus were recorded so, "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

2. **The Gospel writers had an objective of 'evangelising':** It was not their intention to write a comprehensive history or biography of Jesus in the modern sense. Instead, they were setting forth the

good news of Jesus Christ, with a view to inducing their readers to believe in him.

Michael Green emphasises the same point: “the great thing to remember” he says of the Gospels “is that they are an entirely new *genre*. Clearly, they are not biographies of Jesus in the conventional sense. What biography would fail to tell us of any of the physical features or personal details of its hero, pass over thirty of his thirty three (?) years without mention, and concentrate up to half of its account on his death? Equally obviously, they are not histories either, in the normally accepted sense of the word. The evangelists cheerfully bring God and his actions into the story—which would look odd in a history book. On the whole they are singularly lacking both in chronology and in references to what is going on in the secular world.”⁵

3. The Gospel writers were historians of salvation history: God is the God of creation, of the covenant, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, He is the God of the Exodus from Egypt, the God of the Judges and Kings, of the prophets and wise men. But above all He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, whose most mighty act was performed through the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, culminating in the gift of His Spirit and the birth of His church. As Stott notes “The history it [the Scripture] records is ‘salvation history’ and the salvation it proclaims was achieved by means of historical events”.⁶

4. Among the Gospel writers, Luke outlines his purpose in writing his Gospel most explicitly (See Luke 1:1-4): Luke speaks of things that have been ‘fulfilled’, a clear reference to the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies, especially in the terms of the birth of Jesus. Luke refers to the fact that he himself had carefully ‘investigated everything from the beginning’ from ‘eyewitness’ reports, in order to write ‘an orderly account’, so that the reader will ‘know the certainty’ of the events.

Stott comments on these introductory four verses from Luke: “....the tradition which emanated from the original eyewitnesses did not remain oral. No, ‘many’ had undertaken to ‘draw up an account’ of what had happened. So Luke followed suit. He

clearly states his qualification, namely that he had ‘carefully investigated everything from the beginning.’ That is, he had not taken everything on trust from the apostolic eyewitnesses; he had personally checked what had been handed down to him. When and how he did this we do not know, but we can make a guess. He tells us (by one of his unobtrusive ‘we’ sections in the Acts [which Luke also wrote]) that he arrived in Judaea with Paul after the third missionary journey (Acts 21:15) and that about two-and-a-half years later he left with Paul on their journey to Rome (Acts 27:1). During most of the interim period Paul was in prison in Caesarea (Acts 24:27). But Luke was a free man. He does not tell us how he occupied his time, but the strong probability is that he travelled the length and breadth of the Holy Land, visiting the sacred sites associated with the ministry of Jesus, and interviewing the people who had known and heard him.”⁷

5. The language of Luke was not that of a man writing unhistorical myths: Luke’s claim is entirely different and clear. He has personally and carefully investigated what the eyewitnesses had passed on. He wrote an orderly account of what his investigations had revealed.

6. The early witnesses were reliable because they were Christians: As Stott says: “Most of us, before we buy or read a book, want to know something about its author, about his character and about his qualifications for writing it. Is he trustworthy? whatever uncertainty there may be about the identity of the four Gospel writers, there is no uncertainty about the fact that they were all dedicated followers of the Lord Jesus. And the Lord Jesus they followed (according to one of them) said he had come to bear witness to the truth, claimed even to be himself the truthwe can assert without fear of contradiction, therefore, that the evangelists were themselves honest men.”⁸

7. The Gospel writers’ impartiality: This is shown by the fact that they include mysterious sayings of Jesus which, for fear of misinterpretation, they might have preferred to omit. They also include incidents about themselves which, as leaders of the church, they would doubtless rather forget, such as the selfish request of

James and John for the most honourable seats in the kingdom, and Peter's shameful threefold denial of the Lord. The writers make no attempt to hide their earlier failings, again demonstrating their commitment to truth.

8. Can we believe that God, who sent the Lord Jesus into the world to usher in a new age, something decisive for the salvation of mankind, should allow this message to be lost in the mists of antiquity? Stott: "Such a contradiction is impossible. Instead, it is reasonable in itself, and congruous with the Old Testament pattern, to affirm that the God who spoke and acted uniquely through Jesus would also make provision for his revelation and redemption to be written down by reliable witnesses, so that future generations throughout the world might partake of their benefits too."⁹

The reliability of the Gospels

The word "gospel" means "good tidings". It comes from two Anglo-Saxon words: "god" = good, and "spell" = news. The Greek word "evangelion" really means "good message" and is translated "gospel" in the New Testament. The gospel is the good news entrusted to Christ's followers to tell the world that salvation is available to all people who truly repent (or turn away from) their rebellion against God (or from sin), and turn in faith to the Lord Jesus. The gospel offers this salvation and tells how it may be had. As one missionary, J.E. Church, once wrote, the gospel can be summarised in the verse John 3:16 (which many would cite as the single most important verse in the whole Bible) in the following memorable way:

God so loved the world, that He gave His
 Only begotten
 Son, that whoso believeth on Him should not
 Perish, but have
 Everlasting
 Life

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

The Gospels in the Bible are the four accounts of the life of Jesus —Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. A full treatise on the authorship of the Gospels is outside the scope of this book. Instead, we concentrate on the message which the Gospels bring. The Gospels are essentially the proclamation of this good news about Jesus, who the writers present as God’s way of rescue (or salvation) for all people. Salvation from what? Salvation to what? The Gospel writers are clear that salvation is from the power and grip of sin, and to a place in the family of God:

Matthew: (1: 21) “... you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Mark: (1: 15) “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Luke: (1:77) “... to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”

John: (1:12) “... to all who received him, he gave the right to become children of God ...”

The apostles may not have written their Gospels until thirty or forty years after the events they record, although as noted above good scholarship at the end of the twentieth century suggested a much earlier dating is very likely. The apostles were heavily engaged in preaching this good news and they apparently believed, in any case, that the return of the Lord Jesus in His glory was imminent (i.e. likely to happen in their own lifetimes). They probably saw no need for a detailed written record. Writing was a difficult and expensive process in the days before the invention of printing, and was not valued as much as the spoken word. So, for between twenty and forty years the Gospels were not written, although during these years many of the epistles (or letters) which form half of the New Testament and which develop the theology of Christ’s sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin, were written. The time came, however, as eyewitnesses became fewer and fewer, for their testimony to be preserved in writing for future generations.

The objection might be raised, if they were written so “late”,

can the Gospels be reliable? In a modern legal sense, the answer is certainly yes, they would be acceptable as evidence in a modern court of law. In 1999 there was a legal case in the UK to try an alleged war criminal from the second world war. Written and oral evidence from witnesses was gathered more than fifty years after the events.¹⁰ When considering the New Testament as a whole, the same preaching about Jesus can be found across the various books that go to make up the New Testament. There is, therefore, little doubt that this unplanned homogeneity faithfully represents the Christian message. Whilst there was no human editor-in-chief of the books (they were, after all, written by different people at different times and for different audiences) Christians see a divine Editor who inspires the whole.

The survival of eyewitnesses to the time the books were written provides considerable confidence in their truthfulness. Bearing in mind the possible time delay on writing the Gospels, it is also noticeable that what we might presume were pressing concerns and controversies of the early church (such as the Holy Spirit, circumcision, the lordship of Jesus, meat offered to idols, etc) are completely absent in the Gospels —another factor suggesting their truthfulness. After all, there would have been, for any leader with dishonest motives for writing the Gospels, an overwhelming temptation to have used these same Gospels to put forward their own partisan viewpoints in these controversies.

Consider, also, the amazing and timeless teaching provided by the parables. Are these the genuine teachings of Jesus? Without serious question, the answer is yes, these are the authentic teachings of Jesus. Why would the Gospel writers have pretended He taught in this remarkable way if He did not? Who could have been the genius who devised them if it was not Jesus? “One thing is clear,” writes Michael Green, “Nobody in Judaism before him taught in parables like that. And nobody after him was able to continue it. The early church did not preach in parables: but they knew Jesus had done so.”¹¹

The reliability of the Gospels is attested in themselves. We have already seen how, in the opening four verses of Luke, the writer

gives a clear statement of the fact that he has carefully studied the reports of the ‘things that have been fulfilled among us’ as they were ‘handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses’, and that he has ‘carefully investigated everything’ so as to write ‘an orderly account’ leading to his readers knowing ‘the certainty of the things you have been taught’. Matthew gives a hint as to his reason for writing his Gospel in the closing verses (28:19), where he records the Lord Jesus’ final commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Matthew’s lasting response to this great commission was in writing his Gospel account.

Mark, like Luke, gives a clue as to his reason for writing in the first few verses of his Gospel: “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet...” Mark sees in Jesus the fulfilment of Scripture, and that Jesus’ authority is demonstrated in His teaching, in His power over demons and in forgiving people’s sins. Mark presents the story of Jesus in a straightforward, vigorous way, with emphasis on what Jesus did rather than what he taught.

The Gospel according to John presents Jesus as the eternal *word* of God, who became a human being and lived among us. As the book itself says, it was written so that, “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name” (John 20:31). After an introduction that identifies the eternal Word of God with Jesus, the first part of the Gospel presents various miracles which show Jesus as the promised Saviour, the Son of God.

It might be said, therefore, that the Gospel writers have a serious purpose in writing their accounts of the life and work of Jesus, and that they present Him as Lord, in whom they want their readers to put their faith and trust. These books present themselves as truth, and anyone who thinks that these accounts are partly mythological (or completely mythological, as used to be taught by the Communists), needs to answer this question: why should the

Gospel writers, four different men writing at different intervals, two of whom were definitely eyewitnesses of the events they describe, seek to deceive their readers? What benefit would they achieve thereby? Had they sought money, there might have been some reason—but they lived, by all accounts, as their Lord had predicted they would, with nowhere to lie down and rest (Luke 9:58), taking no money with them (e.g. Matt 6:19, 24 and Luke 9:3). Had they sought an easy life, there might have been some reason, but the anecdotal evidence is that many of the disciples paid gruesomely, even with their lives, for their allegiance to Jesus as their Lord. The evidence is that they lived, as Jesus had said His followers must, forgetting self, carrying their own cross and following Him (Mark 8:34).

If, perchance, one of the Gospel writers was deranged, the mathematical chances of four of them being so deranged are extremely remote. And had one or all of them been so deranged, it is unlikely they could have written such self-consistent (and mutually consistent) accounts. Nor is it likely that thousands of sane people would have followed their teaching about Jesus, a course that, in the first century, led them almost inevitably into conflict with the all-pervading and desperately cruel Roman empire.

To what extent did the Gospel writers depend on each other?

The Gospels describe the same basic events around the life of the Lord Jesus, but they tell them differently. The first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are usually referred to as synoptic, in that they provide a similar account of the events. Matthew and Luke appear to have referred to Mark's Gospel, which was almost certainly the first to be written, and indeed to have included most of it in theirs. They share, in addition, some other common material which Scholars refer to as 'Q' (from the German word 'Quell' - a source. Some scholars believe that 'Q' was a very early document containing some of Jesus' teachings. Most recent scholarly work has, however, questioned whether, in fact, 'Q' existed). Matthew

and Luke each contain independent material. It is less clear to what extent, if at all, that John used the other Gospels.

The apostle Peter referred to Mark as his ‘son’, obviously in a spiritual sense (1 Peter 5:13), and it was to Mark’s house that Peter first went after his miraculous release from prison (Acts 12:11-12). Some have subtitled Mark’s Gospel as Peter’s Gospel, and certainly the second century church fathers Papias and Irenaeus described Mark as Peter’s interpreter.

Some scholars believe Matthew’s name may have been attached to the first Gospel because the assumed common source known as ‘Q’, consisting of the sayings of Jesus, was probably Matthew’s work. It is known that Matthew was a tax collector and was, without doubt, used to keeping detailed records. The Gospel attributed to Matthew is certainly very Jewish and often focuses on the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. We have already noted that recent research suggests a much earlier writing of Matthew’s Gospel than has been assumed for much of the twentieth century.

Luke was the only Gentile (non-Jewish) Gospel writer and was a physician (Colossians 4:14) and therefore an educated man. He travelled widely, accompanying Paul on some of his missionary journeys, which would have provided every opportunity and incentive for him to absorb the apostle’s teachings about God’s grace to the Gentiles. Luke’s Gospel consequently majors on the theme of the universal scope of God’s love, as illustrated by Luke’s concern to mention the various ‘outcasts’ to whom Jesus ministered —women and children, tax collectors, lepers, Samaritans and Gentiles.

John’s Gospel is quite different from the other three. Readers are immediately struck by his theological emphasis, literary style and vocabulary. Jesus is presented first and foremost as God’s Logos (‘Word’) made flesh. All Jesus’ great “I am” statements are found in John. His claims about Jesus’ deity are more outspoken than in the other three Gospels. Recent writers have commented on the ‘Jewishness’ of the Gospel whose writer was clearly familiar with contemporary Judaeian and Galilean culture and geography, and

is seen as being a historically reliable witness.

Such minor differences as appear to exist between the four Gospels in fact tend to suggest that their writers did not depend on each other. Had the four Gospels been entirely consistent in style and detail, no doubt they would have been attacked as collusion. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, if the evidence is viewed frankly and fairly, that the Gospels are exactly as they present themselves, four accounts by four different witnesses of the same basic facts.

Notes

¹ John Stott *Understanding the Bible* Revised Edition (Scripture Union, 1984), p. 147.

² *Ibid.* p. 152.

³ Michael Green *World on the Run* (InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 43.

⁴ John Stott *The Authentic Jesus* (Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1985), Chapter 1.

⁵ *Op. cit.* *World on the Run*, p. 47.

⁶ *Op. cit.* *The Authentic Jesus*, p. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ A successful prosecution and subsequent conviction was secured on the basis of this evidence.

¹¹ *Op. cit.* *World on the Run*, p. 48.

