

### 3. Were the Gospel Writers Eyewitnesses?

‘Most of what the four canonical gospels share is derived from a common source<sup>1</sup>, either Mark's gospel or a lost work of which Mark is the earliest extant descendant. Nobody knows who the four evangelists were, but they almost certainly never met Jesus personally.’ “The only difference between *The Da Vinci Code* and the gospels is that the gospels are ancient fiction while *The Da Vinci Code* is modern fiction’. (Dawkins, 2006)

Were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John eyewitnesses to the events they describe? One person who will not give you an answer to this question is Richard Dawkins, whose statement above begins with a howler that would embarrass biblical scholars of all persuasions.

Dawkins refers to a ‘common source gospel or a lost work of which Mark is the earliest extant descendant’. This hypothetical original gospel is known as ‘Q’, from the German *Quelle*, meaning ‘source’. It is often referred to by scholars as ‘lost’. Not a single fragment of it exists. Nor is there any contemporary reference to it: indeed, it was not until 1900 that the Q theory came into being. So, instead of being lost, Q may be imaginary. That is the conclusion I have reached. The ‘empirical’ Prof Dawkins compares the Gospels to *The Da Vinci Code*; it doesn’t seem to have occurred to him that it is the hypothetical Q, not the Gospels, that resembles Dan Brown’s fatuous thriller. Moreover, he has not even grasped the outline of the Q theory. Those academics who believe in Q (mistakenly in my judgment) have never claimed, as Dawkins does above, that Mark descends from it. They believe that Q inspired those passages in Matthew and Luke *not* drawn from Mark. Also, they do not suggest that John is derived from Q. Five minutes’ research would have told Dawkins this.

If Q was a major source for Matthew,<sup>2</sup> as it has been proposed, why does he make no reference to this source, directly or indirectly? In his Gospel we find 141 verses – 13

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<sup>1</sup> It is ironic Dawkins suggests this, as a man wedded entirely to the empirical method of the natural sciences, for there is not one shred of evidence for it — not one fragment of a papyrus, not one bit of stone carving nor anything else to support this common source. There is only conjecture.

<sup>2</sup> Marcion, in the middle of the second century, seems to have accepted parts of Luke and all the Pauline letters as being authentic, and created an alternative make up to the traditional advocacy of the Gospels. Later in this section, you will see that I can track 25% of Romans to direct teachings or things said in the Gospels, which Paul treated as authentic. This would suggest Marcion was confused. The early church fathers dismissed the Marcion Cannon, as do I for the reason just given.

per cent of the total – that contain quotes from the Old Testament or allude directly to its content. If Matthew and Luke were heavily dependent on a common source or sources (there are variants of the Q hypothesis that involve more than one ‘lost’ author), one would expect to find these authorities peppered across the Gospels in support of witness testimony, rather as the Old Testament authors are.

Reading the Gospels, I can find no apparent quotes from or analogies to unidentified material. Seen in this light, much modern New Testament ‘source criticism’ and ‘form criticism’ emerges as highly speculative. Indeed, the whole body of such work would appear to me to have been a 200-year diversion into a very long cul-de-sac of epic proportions. Let us take a look at this disastrous wrong turn taken by scholars. This diversion begins with what is known as the Synoptic Problem – though I prefer to put inverted commas around ‘problem’, as I don’t believe that one exists.

### **The Synoptic ‘Problem’**

The most persuasive evidence of the life of Christ comes from eyewitnesses; there is no substitute for first-hand witness testimony, either 2,000 years ago or today. The apostles realised this, and so it is no surprise that it is generally believed that towards the end of their lives some of them committed their testaments to writing. This is hardly surprising: the early Christians, knowing that the apostles were dying out, needed verbal eyewitness testimony in the form of written texts. In the preface to Luke’s Gospel, for example, it is clear that others had written before he did – and were, like him, eyewitnesses:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled[a] among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

We also have evidence from a direct colleague of the apostle John, Bishop Papias of Hierapolis. The original writings of Papius survive only in fragments, but they are very early indeed. Irenaeus, writing in about 180 AD, describes him as ‘a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp’, the latter being Irenaeus’s own teacher. Papias writes:

I shall not hesitate also to put into ordered form for you, along with the interpretations, everything I learned carefully in the past from the elders and noted down carefully, for the truth of which I vouch. For unlike most people I took no pleasure in those who told many different stories, but only in those who taught the truth. Nor did I take pleasure in those who reported their memory of someone else's commandments, but only in those who reported their memory of the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the Truth itself. And if by chance anyone who had been in attendance on the elders arrived, I made enquiries about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and John the Elder, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from the books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.<sup>3</sup>

Irenaeus, Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria (who cites from others as well, but carefully distinguishes the apostolic voices), Clement of Rome and Tertullian all held the four canonical apostolic gospels to be the true and the only ones: they make no mention of the 'lost' gospel text known as Q, presumably on the grounds that it did not exist. The tradition of the early Church Fathers records the sequencing of the Gospels as: Matthew, Mark, Luke and then John. Of course, these people were nearer in time to the truth of Gospel events than we are, but modern criticism seems to take umbrage with this. For example, many scholars now think that Mark was the earliest Gospel, used by Matthew and Luke – who, in addition, used the aforementioned Q (whose existence was first proposed, may I remind you, in 1900).

The first three Gospels are considered similar for the following reasons: they follow the same time line when recording narratives of Jesus' Baptism, His Temptation by the Devil, and public ministry in Galilee. They all take Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi as the turning point of the ministry, followed by the last journey to Jerusalem, the trial, the crucifixion and the resurrection.

However, there are many divergences. For example, there are differences in both the order and narration in the story of the centurion's servant (see Matthew 8:5 and Luke 7:1). Also, the Passion narratives are worded differently. Furthermore, the birth narratives as told by Matthew and Luke differ in the telling, and seem to bear very little relationship to each other. Luke has a unique travel narrative leading up to the birth of Christ. Matthew, exclusively, has Peter walking on water, and the story of the coin in the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.viii.xxxix.html>

mouth of the fish. Matthew has a Sermon on the Mount and Luke a shorter Sermon on the Plain.

Nonetheless, the three Synoptics often agree in sections covering the same ground - Matthew and Mark often agreeing with Luke, and Mark with Matthew; more rarely, Matthew and Luke with Mark.

### **'Source criticism'**

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was a German playwright turned amateur scholar who rejected belief in the miracles of the Bible. In 1778 he suggested that the Gospels were all translations and abstracts from 'The Gospel of the Nazarene', which Jerome mentions as being current in the fourth century within a sect called the Nazarenes, written originally in Aramaic. The trouble with this is that we have only scant secondary testimony that this 'gospel' ever existed, and none of the Church Fathers made it part of the emerging canon.

Lessing was followed by other scholars, mostly German, who fell in love with the idea that an 'oral gospel' was the source of the canonical four. Various elaborate theories were presented: for example, that this oral gospel was expanded into no fewer than nine gospels before being boiled down into four. These theories formed the basis of what has become known as 'source criticism'.

Brooke Westcott, in his *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels* (1851), argued that because the Jews had a tradition of transmitting important material orally, this would have inhibited the early Jewish Christians from writing down eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. The first Christian preachers, not being natural writers, would have developed oral teaching that fitted the needs of various audiences. Thus Matthew and Mark were aimed at Jews, while Luke was orientated towards gentiles.

These theories lack one crucial ingredient: documentary evidence. Nevertheless, a whole industry of New Testament scholarship has developed from this genesis. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a consensus emerged, one we've already touched on. It was concluded that there must be two written sources: one of them the canonical Mark or an earlier version of it, the other a common source for Matthew and Luke on the grounds that there are no fewer than 250 verses in agreement between the two of them but not found in Mark. This second source is, of course, the famous Q. However, as there are divergences as

well as similarities between Matthew and Luke, it has become the fashion to posit further sources that they might have drawn upon to compose their own Gospels.

B.H. Streeter, in *The Four Gospels* (1924), offers a template for what was to become an alphabet soup of 'sources'. He argues that Q is only used in passages common to Matthew and Luke. Matthew has his own source, 'M', a Jerusalem Gospel, for sayings specific to him – as does Luke, whose 'L' is composed in the Caesarean tradition and was probably oral in character. Meanwhile both draw on Mark, who, we're told, wrote for a Roman audience.

All this assumes that there is a literary dependence between the synoptic Gospels that can be untangled. Mark is given priority because 90 per cent of his material appears in Matthew: there are only seven short passages that do not appear there. About half of Matthew is in Luke: if you take Matthew and Luke together, all but four paragraphs are omitted. But writing styles differ between them, suggesting different authorship – a fact that underlines just how much speculation is involved in the modern rearrangement of the Gospels' order of composition and theories about extra sources.

Papias, writing in 100 A.D., recalled that John the Elder had told him about how Peter would randomly dictate things to Mark to write down, and that this was the *Logia* that became Mark's Gospel, with Matthew putting it in an ordered fashion that essentially completed his own Gospel. Accordingly, Mark narrated the words of Peter, and in effect did not write his Gospel according to this Papias reference out of anything other than the testimony of St Peter. Interestingly, there does not seem to have been any outcry by the early Church Fathers regarding authentic Gospel sayings or teachings being demoted to favour non-apostolic witness sources. Also, no one ever reported the existence of, let alone saw, Q, M, or L until the imaginations of scholars got to work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **'Formgeschichte' (Form History) or Form Criticism**

While Source Criticism claims to critique the literary sources that were extant at the time, as we have seen, Form Criticism sets out to study the origins of Mark and Q – that is, to try to fill that gap between the death of Christ and the first extant writings.

In 1919, Martin Dibelius, a German professor of New Testament studies from Heidelberg, proposed that short narrative sermons emphasising the wonder-working powers of Jesus were the earliest literary forms of Christianity. Preachers imposed these forms on the whole Church, and they were then developed by storytellers, with 'sayings' added to the result by the preachers. Also thrown into the mix were 'legends' such as the Nativity story – and events such as Jesus' baptism, temptation and transfiguration were fleshed out with myth-like figures and literary devices. This process, Dibelius claimed, left us with the three synoptic Gospels. The problem, of course, is that the process is not recorded by history; it is pure speculation.

The attempted 'demythologisation' of the New Testament began in earnest with the writings of the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, a New Testament scholar and anti-Nazi Lutheran who argued that the key events in the life of Christ – up to and including the resurrection – were myths. Influenced by Martin Heidegger, Bultmann argued that modern man is incapable of believing in patently impossible miracles; therefore he must move 'beyond' the claims of the Gospels towards an existential encounter with Christ. He saw the Gospels as a source of theology, not history proper. Their stories were 'developed' by the early Christian community rather than being compiled by any specific authors.

What Bultmann can't tell us, however, is just why the early Christian community would develop stories that they knew not to be true, in order that others might fervently believe. Also, we encounter a familiar problem: lack of documentary evidence of this process of composition. The same is true of the writings of John Robinson, a liberal Anglican bishop who, while rejecting Bultmann's theses as too sweeping, reserves to himself the right to decide what is church-created, preacher-created or a matter of historical fact.

I'm not arguing, however, that Christians should not address the question of when, how and by whom the canonical Gospels were composed. Some very enlightening work has been done in this area by first-rate scholars.

The late Donald Guthrie, for example, was a New Testament scholar who dug deeply into questions of the Gospels' authorship, sources, translation and literary form. He made the important point that Jesus may have reiterated His messages on a number of occasions during His ministry, resulting in their re-appearance at different times in the Gospels, which may be regarded as un-historical in terms of chronology. And he

reiterates the question that liberal scholars seem unable to answer: why would the first Christians be prepared to die on such a large scale for a faith they knew to be based on 'myths' and 'legends'?

Like Guthrie, I am unconvinced by theories that turned the Evangelists into no more than arrangers of traditions, when they claim to be witnesses, or to have taken instruction from witnesses, or to have questioned witnesses. Quite apart from the absence of historical evidence describing this process of 'arrangement', these theories assume that early converts to Christianity were credulous enough to accept more or less anything that was on offer. Becoming a Christian was a dangerous act (as, alas, it still is in many countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century). These converts would have needed as much reassurance as possible that the accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were true. And when it comes to such reassurance, there is no substitute for genuine eyewitness accounts.

Significantly, in the Preface to his Gospel, Luke clearly states that his information came from 'the Ministers of the Word' who were 'eyewitnesses'. This suggests that his audience would accept that he was not necessarily a direct witness and they would have expected him to at least have consulted witnesses to give his text any credibility.

The Gospels were considered to be authoritative from the earliest of times. There is no evidence that their authorship was disputed – with the exception of a second-century attack on John's Gospel by a Gnostic sect called the Alogi, who argued that it was written by someone called Cerinthus. Other Gnostics attacked the Gospels without disputing their authorship. Indeed, they were and still are unique: four accounts of one person whom history records did exist at the time that the documents claim. The Synoptic 'problem' is, paradoxically, caused by the coincidence of accounts of Jesus, not fake or mythical ones.

The 'forms', if we want to use this term and concept, were orally transmitted teachings emanating from the eyewitnesses themselves. 'Gospels' that were thought to be inauthentic – and there were many, all of them patently bogus and written suspiciously late – were decisively rejected by the early Church. In contrast, the Church recognised that the four Gospels, while differing from each other in precisely the way that eyewitness accounts always do, reinforce each other to a remarkable degree. They therefore became part of the New Testament canon, as did the writings of another source of information about Jesus: the apostle Paul, the subject of the next chapter.