

CHAPTER 5

PROOF OF THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF THE GOSPELS, THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, AND THE EPISTLES OF ST PAUL

Summary

The four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles of St Paul must be accepted as historical if they satisfy the three tests of (a) genuineness; (b) veracity; and (c) integrity.

A. The Gospels:

- (a) Their genuineness proved by external and confirmed by internal evidence.
- (b) Their veracity established by the character and history of the writers, and by the impossibility of fraud.
- (c) Their integrity assured, chiefly, by the reverence of the early Christians for the sacred text.

B. The Acts of the Apostles and Epistles of St Paul: genuineness, veracity and integrity, similarly established.

C. Confirmation in recent research.

The New Testament may be looked at from two points of view:

1. as consisting of ordinary historical documents;
2. as a series or collection of divinely inspired books, having God as their principal Author.

Inspiration is an influence breathed forth by God on the soul of a writer, so that he expresses what God wishes him to express and nothing else. It is not perceptible to the senses, nor deducible from the text. The fact of its bestowal can be ascertained only from the testimony of God Himself. That testimony He gives through the Catholic Church, as we shall see. From her infallible authority we shall learn of the existence of inspired Scripture and the books of which it consists.

In this chapter we make *no reference to inspiration*. We treat certain books of the New Testament from a human point of view, and we establish by reason that they are trustworthy historical documents.

The tests by which we shall establish the historical value of the New Testament writings.

The four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles of St Paul, are the portions of the New Testament writings on which we chiefly rely to prove the divinity of Christ and the authority of the Church which He founded. As the Gospels are of special importance in our proof, we give at some length the arguments which show that, even if we leave aside all question of their inspiration and regard them as merely secular compilations, we must accept them as historical.

The Gospels were authored by SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.¹ They were placed in that order from the first centuries, because that was taken to be the order of their writing. The Gospels of SS. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels, because of their close resemblance in matter and arrangement: they give us, as it were, but one picture, not three distinct pictures, of Christ. St Matthew probably wrote first. St Mark probably wrote between 50 and 60 A.D.; St Luke, some time before the year 60. As Our Lord died about the year 33 A.D., these three Gospels were written within the lifetime of those who had seen and known Him. St John's Gospel, written last, supplements the account of the other three. Its distinctive features are its report of the discourses of Christ, miracles not mentioned by the others (such as the raising of Lazarus), and the prominence which it gives to the arguments for Christ's Divinity.

The word "gospel" means "good tidings"; the Gospels convey the good news of the coming of the Redeemer. The writers of the Gospels are called, from the Greek title, Evangelists.

The Acts of the Apostles was written by St Luke not long after he had completed his Gospel.

The Epistles of St Paul were written within the period 50-67 A.D.

¹ The relics of *St Matthew* are in the Cathedral of Salerno, Italy; of *St Mark* a portion is in the Basilica of St Mark, Venice, Italy, but the major portion since 1968 in St Mark's (Coptic Orthodox) Cathedral, Cairo, Egypt. Relics of *St Luke* are in the Basilica of St Giustina in Padua, Italy. The empty tomb of *St John* is in the ruins of St John's Basilica, Ephesus, Turkey.

A work must be accepted as historical, or, in other words, as a faithful narrative of past events, (a) if it is genuine, i.e., if it is the work of the author to whom it is ascribed; (b) if its author himself is trustworthy, i.e., if it be shown that he was well informed and truthful; (c) if it is intact, i.e., if the text is substantially as it left the author's hand. All these conditions, as we shall show, are fulfilled in the case of the New Testament writings.

A. PROOF OF HISTORICAL VALUE OF THE GOSPELS

The genuineness of the Gospels. "Genuineness" has the same meaning as "authenticity". The genuineness, truthfulness, and integrity of the Gospels are most readily demonstrated by showing the impossibility of the opposites, i.e., forgery, untruthfulness and change of text. The Gospels are the genuine work of the writers to whom they are ascribed:

I. *External evidence.* The testimony of Christian and non-Christian writers of the first two centuries shows that the Gospels were widely known, carefully studied, and revered everywhere in the Christian world. (For details see small print below).

The fact that the Gospels were held in veneration and were in *practical use* all over the Church within one hundred years of the death of the Apostles, and while their memory was still vivid, is a conclusive proof of their genuineness. Would the Apostles themselves or their immediate successors, who gave their lives to testify to the truth of all that is contained in the Gospels, have allowed a series of forgeries to be published, and palmed off as the inspired Word of God? Would Jewish converts have accepted them, without jealous scrutiny, as equal in authority to their own profoundly revered books of the Old Testament? Would the Gentiles, so many of them men of the highest education, have embraced a religion which made such severe demands on human nature, which exacted even the sacrifice of life itself in witness of the faith, without previously assuring themselves of the genuineness of its written sources? Would learned pagans and heretics have fastened on all kinds of arguments against the Church, and have neglected the strongest of all, namely, that its sacred books were forgeries? Would the faithful throughout the world, at a time when to be a Christian was to be a potential martyr, have all conspired without a single protest to fabricate and accept these books, falsely ascribe them to the Evangelists, and hand down the impious fraud as an everlasting inheritance for the veneration and guidance of their children's children? We must, therefore, either accept the Gospels as genuine, or commit ourselves to a series of puerile absurdities.

The period in which the Gospels were written cannot be described as an age when the human mind was in its infancy. Dr Arendzen writes of it: "The world into which Christ was born was the most refined and cultured history knows. ... The Græco-Roman world was one of astounding peace and well-being, of amazing splendour and political achievement, an age of choice literature, of wonderful works of art, of profound but restless speculation. The three centuries that lie between 40 B.C. and 260 A.D. are in many respects those of the highest prosperity men have ever known."² The entire age is still today the object of study by scholars and universities.

Testimony of Early Writers.

- Numerous texts from the Evangelists are quoted in the letters of Pope Clement (96 A.D.), St Ignatius of Antioch (once in Syria; now Antakya, Turkey: 107 A.D.), St Polycarp of Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey: d. c. 155 A.D.), and other disciples of the Apostles; also in the *Shepherd of Hermas* (c. 145 A.D.), the *Letter to Diognetus* (2nd cent.), and in the important work entitled *The Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve*, written some time between 95-130 A.D.
- St Justin of Samaria and Rome, who became a Christian in 130 A.D., says that the Gospels were written by Apostles and disciples, and were read at the meetings of Christians on Sundays.³
- Papias of Phrygia, Asia Minor, disciple or associate of St John, writing about 120 A.D., explains the circumstances in which the Gospel of St Mark was composed, and refers to a collection of the Lord's sayings in Hebrew by St Matthew, probably his Gospel, or an early version of it.⁴
- Tatian wrote his *Diatesseron*, or harmony of the four Gospels, about the year 170 A.D. The genuineness of the work is not disputed.

² *The Gospels—Fact, Myth, or Legend?*, Sands & Co., London 1929, pp.95-6

³ *Apology I*, 66-67; *Dialogue with Trypho*, 103

⁴ Quoted by Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (Church History) III, 39.

- St Irenaeus of Lyons (in Gaul, modern France), writing about 180 A.D., says, “Matthew wrote a Gospel for the Jews in their own language, while Peter and Paul were preaching and establishing the Church at Rome. After their departure [or “death”: the Gk is uncertain], Mark, also, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, handed down to us in writing the information which Peter had given. And Luke, the follower of Paul, wrote out the Gospel which Paul used to preach. Later, John, the disciple of the Lord, who had reclined on his breast, published his Gospel during his sojourn at Ephesus in Asia Minor.”⁵ The personal history of St Irenaeus invests his testimony with special importance: a native of Asia Minor, in his early youth he drank in with avid ears, he tells us, the discourses of St Polycarp who was himself a disciple of St John, Apostle and Evangelist;⁶ he became bishop of Lyons, and lived for some time at Rome. His testimony, therefore, representing the tradition of East and West and of what was then undoubtedly the heart of Christendom, must be accepted as decisive.
- Tertullian of Africa, writing against the heretic Marcion, about 200 A.D., appeals to the authority of the churches, “all of which have had our Gospels since Apostolic times.” He speaks of the Gospels as the work of the Apostles Matthew and John, and of the disciples Mark and Luke.
- Heretics, e.g., Basilides (d. 130 A.D.), and pagans, e.g., Celsus (d. c. 200 A.D.), did not question the genuineness of the Gospels.

Later testimony is abundant. Probably there is not one of the pagan classics whose genuineness can be supported by such convincing evidence. No one disputes that Julius Caesar was the author of the *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*, and yet the only ancient references to the work are found in the writings of Plutarch and Suetonius, about one hundred years after its composition.

II. *Internal Evidence.* An examination of the texts themselves proves that the writers were Jews, and were contemporaries, or in close touch with contemporaries, of the events they record:

1. The writers were Jews: (a) The Gospels are written in the colloquial Greek of the period, known as Hellenistic or Koine Greek, but show marked traces of Hebrew idiom. The Gospel of St Matthew was first written in Hebrew or Aramaic (now lost), and was shortly afterwards translated into Hellenistic Greek. This popular form of the Greek language was employed during the first century of the Christian era as a literary medium by Jews, such as Philo (d. 50 A.D.) and the historian Flavius Josephus (c. 37-c. 100), but not subsequently. By use of Hebrew idiom in the Gospels, the body is spoken of as “the flesh”; “soul” means life, temporal or eternal; “my soul” is sometimes used as the equivalent of the pronoun “I”; abstract terms are avoided, - thus, “the meek”, “the clean of heart”, and other such expressions are employed instead of “meekness”, “purity” and so on. God is referred to by the use of the word “Heaven”, as, e.g., in the phrase, “Kingdom of Heaven”, or by use of the passive, e.g., “Ask, and it will be given you” - namely, by God. The Hebrew expression, “Son of ...”, is frequently used, e.g., “Son of man” (e.g., Mk 8:31), “son of perdition” (Jn 17:12; 2 Thess 2:3), “sons of the resurrection” (Lk 20:36), “son of peace” (Lk 10:6), “sons of light” (Jn 12:36). These are typical Hebrew idioms, found nowhere else in Greek texts. Many other examples could be given.

(b) The writers show no acquaintance with Greek literature or philosophy, but are familiar with the religion, customs, and usages of the Jewish people.

2. The authors were contemporaries, or in close touch with contemporaries, of the events they narrate: (a) Modern scholarship has failed to detect any error on the part of the Evangelists in the countless references to topography and to the political, social, and religious conditions of Palestine at the time of Christ. Those conditions, peculiarly complicated and transient, could not have been accurately portrayed by a stranger to Palestine or by a late writer. The Gospels depict them faithfully: government was administered in part by the Romans and in part by the natives; the Sanhedrin, or great religious council of Jewish judges, still exercised its functions, and was in frequent conflict with the civil officials; taxes were paid in Greek money, Roman money was used in commerce, dues to the Temple were paid in Jewish money; the languages Hebrew and Greek, and, to some extent, Latin, were spoken. In general, public and private life was affected in many ways by the diversity of language and the division of authority. The unsuccessful rebellion against the Romans (66-70 A.D.), which flung a devastating flood of war over the land, sweeping the Holy City and the Temple off the face of the earth, was followed by enormous changes in population and government. A writer, therefore, who was not a contemporary of Christ, or in intimate relations with His contemporaries, would certainly have committed many errors when dealing with the period which preceded that great catastrophe. Recent discoveries have all confirmed the truth of the Biblical accounts. Among numerous discoveries and excavations in the 20th century can be named: the house of Peter, the pool of five porticoes mentioned in St John 5:2, the synagogue of Capernaum, the judgement seat at Gabbatha (Jn 19:13) in the Fortress of Antonia, the inscription of Pontius Pilate at the Roman theatre in Caesarea, and the tomb of the high priest Caiaphas.

(b) The vividness and detail of the narrative can only spring from personal contact with the events recorded.

⁵ *Adversus Haereses* (Against the Heresies) III, 1

⁶ Quoted by Eusebius, *Church History*, V, 20.

Trustworthiness of the Evangelists. The Evangelists are trustworthy, because they knew the facts and truthfully recorded them:

1. They knew the facts: SS. Matthew and John had been companions of Christ. SS. Mark and Luke had lived in constant contact with His contemporaries.

2. They were truthful: (a) Their holy lives, and their sufferings in witnessing to the very truths set forth in their Gospels guarantee their sincerity. (b) From the world's standpoint, they had nothing to gain but everything to lose by testifying to the sanctity and the Divinity of Christ. (c) They could not have been untruthful, even if they wanted to: they wrote for contemporaries of the events they narrate, or for men who had known those contemporaries, and could not, without detection, have published a false account. (d) Their narratives appear at some points to be irreconcilable, but can be harmonised by careful investigation. Had the Evangelists been impostors, they would have avoided even the appearance of contradiction. As to variations between the four Gospels in the sayings of Christ, their meaning is not changed by the differing words. Many other variations can be explained by the fact that Christ would have uttered many sayings in various ways as He substantially repeated the same discourses and teachings as He moved from town to town. Every itinerant speaker makes small changes when presenting the same material over and over. (e) They could not have invented their portrait of Christ. His character so noble, so lovable, so tragic, so original, emerging unconsciously, as it were, with ever greater distinctness of outline, as the Gospel narrative proceeds, is, viewed merely as an artistic creation, quite beyond the inventive capacity of men such as the Evangelists were. Besides, every Jew of their day—and the Evangelists were Jews—believed that the Messiah would come to restore the kingdom of David. Not one of them ever dreamt, before the teaching of Christ, that He would come to found, not a temporal, but a spiritual kingdom, to preach meekness, humility, and brotherly love, and to live a life of poverty and persecution, culminating in the agony of the Cross.

The integrity of the Gospels. The Gospels have come down to us intact, i.e., free from corruptions or interpolations. The purity of the text is assured by:

1. The great reverence of the Church for the four Gospels and her rejection of all others. Gospels ascribed to SS. Peter, Thomas and James, and other imitations of Biblical books, were in circulation in the sub-apostolic age, but were discarded by the Church as spurious or false.
2. The practice which prevailed from the earliest times of reading the Gospels at public worship.
3. The wide diffusion of the Gospels among Christian communities all over the world.
4. The substantial uniformity of the text in all manuscripts, some of which date from the fourth century.

Public reading and oral tradition. The memories of the ancients were far better trained and much more employed than those of moderns. In an age when the great majority of people could not read or write, the use of memory was crucial, and it was standard for ordinary people to learn great lists and speeches by heart. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the great ancient Greek epics, were transmitted orally for centuries before being committed to writing. The reliability of oral tradition has only been questioned by an age that has no place for it and demands to see everything in print, with its date and author at the start, before giving credence. The public and weekly reading from the New Testament books ensured both their secure place in the memories of the Christian faithful and the impossibility of substantial change to the text. The value of the guarantee of publicity may be measured from the incident recorded by St Augustine⁷ as having befallen one of his colleagues, an African bishop. He says that St Jerome's use of the word "ivy" for "gourd", in his version of the Book of Jonah, caused such dissatisfaction when read out in church, that the bishop, fearing lest he might lose his people, felt compelled to restore the traditional rendering.

Existing manuscripts and codices. Codex Sinaiticus of the mid 4th century contains the entire New Testament. Codex Vaticanus of the same period contains all the Gospels and most of the rest of the New Testament. Codex Alexandrinus of the early 5th century contains almost all the New Testament. Codex Bezae of the 5th century contains, *inter alia*, the four Gospels. Another codex of the 5th century contains three-fifths of the N.T., and another of the 4-5th century contains the four Gospels.⁸ The reliability of these

⁷ Ep. 71, 5; 82, 35

⁸ Cf. *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1970, vol. 2, p.581.

earliest *complete* copies of books is indicated by the fact that they closely correspond to earlier *portions* of books.

Discoveries of fragments and portions. We do not have the original manuscripts, but the earlier manuscripts from which our complete texts are descended have not perished without a trace. Since 1890, some 60 fragments and portions of N.T. books, dating from the 2nd-4th century, have been discovered in Egypt. They correspond closely to our texts listed above, and it is a fair inference that the missing portions would show the same correspondence. We now have 76 manuscripts of portions of the New Testament going back to the 4th century or earlier.⁹ In 1935, a small fragment—four verses of St John’s Gospel, chapter 18—came to light; it is true to our text, and it is dated c. 125 A.D.¹⁰ Another 2nd century fragment contains Jn 18:36-19:7. We also possess, dated c. 200: portions of 19 verses of St Matthew; papyri of St John’s Gospel containing twelve complete chapters and portions of the other nine; 86 leaves of a codex containing portions of St Paul’s letters. From the early 3rd century we have: portions of 30 leaves with parts of the Gospels and Acts; a papyrus codex containing eight complete chapters of St Luke and five complete chapters of St John. From the 3rd century: two leaves of a codex with some of the text of chapters 1, 16 and 20 of John.¹¹ It is now regarded as practically established that the four Gospels as we know them were circulating in Egypt as separate books within the first half of the second century.

Comparison with Classical Texts. Looking at the table below, we can see that the oldest manuscripts of certain major works of Plato, Caesar, Cicero and Horace date from the 9th century; of Thucydides, Herodotus, Sophocles and Aristotle from the 10th; of Tacitus from the 11th—yet no one doubts that these manuscripts, though ever so many centuries later than their authors’ day, are, substantially, the uncorrupted descendants of the originals. No one would ever have thought of questioning the integrity of the Gospel texts, but for the fact that they contain a Divine Law of belief and conduct, irksome to the irreligious. Whoever would dismiss the New Testament must logically reject all written sources of ancient history and literature.

Author	Work	Date of writing	Earliest complete copy	Time span	No. of early mss., complete or partial ¹²
Horace	Satires	35 B.C.	9th cent.	850 years	17
Cicero	De Senectute	44 B.C.	9th	900	16
Caesar	Gallic Wars	52 B.C.	9th	950	11
Plato	Republic	375 B.C.	9th	1,300	7
Thucydides	Pelopon. War	411 B.C.	10th	1,300	13
Aristotle	Poetics	334 B.C.	10th	1,300	2
Herodotus	History	440-425 B.C.	10th	1,350	11
Sophocles	Antigone	441 B.C.	10th	1,550	4
Tacitus	Annals	110 A.D.	11th	1,000	34
Evangelists, St Paul, etc.	New Testament	40-90 A.D.	4th century	350 years	263 in Greek up to 9th cent. ¹³

In the entire range of ancient literature, the *Iliad* of Homer, committed to writing possibly in the 7th century B.C., is second to the New Testament in terms of the number of ancient manuscripts: we have 372 portions of papyri from the 3rd century B.C. to the 7th cent. A.D., which together give us about 90% of the text. We also have five major manuscripts from the 10th cent. A.D. onward, and about 200 later manuscripts of complete or partial copies of the *Iliad*—but the earliest near complete manuscript is of the 10th cent. A.D.¹⁴

B. PROOF OF THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES AND THE EPISTLES OF ST PAUL

The Acts of the Apostles. The opening words of the Acts and the Gospel of St Luke prove identity of authorship. St Irenaeus, who quotes several passages from the Acts, says that St Luke was the companion of St Paul, and the historian of his labours. The Fragment of Muratori, c. 180, which contains a list of New Testament books, says: “But the Acts of all the Apostles are in one book which, for the excellent Theophilus, Luke wrote, because he was an eye-witness of all.” Similar statements are found in Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and many others. The arguments to prove the integrity of the text and the

⁹ Cf. K. & B. Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1989, p.81.

¹⁰ Aland, *op. cit.*, p.57

¹¹ Listed in Aland, pp.96-102.

¹² mss. = manuscripts. This does not include fragments. All manuscript statistics of the ancient classics are taken from the introductions to the critical editions of these texts published by Société d’Édition *Les Belles Lettres*, Paris.

¹³ Aland, p.106. This figure does not include the even more numerous early manuscripts of translations into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopian, Gothic, Old Church Slavonic and other languages.

¹⁴ P. Mazon, *Introduction à l’Iliade*, Société d’Édition *Les Belles Lettres*, Paris 1959, pp.7-65.

veracity of the author are similar to those advanced in the case of the Gospels, and need not be repeated. Further, the Apostles guaranteed the authenticity of any written or oral messages by sending them with known and trustworthy members of their own people.¹⁵

The Epistles of St Paul. Our adversaries admit the genuineness of the epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Thessalonians and Philemon. Leaving aside the other epistles, whose authenticity they question or deny, we have more than enough for the purposes of our argument to maintain that the majority of writings which go under the name of St Paul are truly his and bear his imprint, and were held to be so by all Christian readers in the centuries that immediately followed him. The arguments to prove the integrity of the text and the veracity of the author are similar to those advanced in the case of the Gospels, and need no repetition. Further, St Paul warned against false messages or letters, and gave specimens of his handwriting to his addressees as a protection against deception.¹⁶ As for the reliability of St Paul's doctrine: if Christ were not the divine Son of God, Paul of Tarsus could not have deified Him, and the Christians would never have admitted His Divinity, for the first Christians were Jews, highly sensitive to blasphemy. St Paul wrote at a time when very many who had listened to the teaching of Christ Himself were still alive. Had he tried, he could not, undetected, have falsified the doctrine of his Master. Like most of the other Apostles, St Paul suffered and died for the faith which he taught: he was beheaded c. 67 A.D. at Tre Fontane, Rome, where the Basilica of St Paul's-Outside-the-Walls now stands over his relics.

C. CONFIRMATION IN RECENT RESEARCH

In the 19th century it became standard for haughty Rationalists to scoff at Christianity and say that the Gospels were mere mythical stories, only loosely based on history, and not written until one hundred years or more after the original events. (Rationalists hold that we can learn no truths except those we discover by the use of our natural reason. Some rationalists profess to be Christians, while rejecting miracles, divine mysteries and everything supernatural). But the discovery of earlier and earlier fragments of manuscripts, the confirmation of the New Testament furnished by archaeological research, as well as the citation of the New Testament writings by Fathers of the early 2nd century A.D., pushed their successors closer and closer to those dates which traditionally were ascribed to the four Gospels and the Epistles of St Paul.

Yet, even German church historian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), a rationalist scholar of high repute among Protestants and Rationalists, said that the Synoptic Gospels were written before 70 A.D. (i.e., before the fall of Jerusalem). After many years of doubt or denial on the question, he concluded that the Gospel of St John is by him and can be dated 80 onwards. He placed the Gospels of Mark and Luke before the year 60, and Acts in the year 62.¹⁷ Shortly before his death, he signified his acceptance of the tradition that St Luke derived his information on the infancy of Jesus from Mary His Mother.¹⁸

Early dating of the books of the New Testament is held by numerous modern scholars.¹⁹ Modern research adduces several complementary arguments for the credibility and early dating of the Gospels, Acts, and letters of St Paul:

(1) *Argument from internal indications of dating.* Italian Biblical scholar and Orientalist, Giuseppe Ricciotti, takes as his starting point the conclusion of the Acts of the Apostles. Acts concludes with St Paul in prison, before his trial had taken place and before the general persecution of Christians under Nero, which began in 64. It was written about 62 or 63, therefore. St Luke wrote Acts after his Gospel, as he states at the start of Acts. His Gospel, therefore, cannot be dated after 60, and tradition places it third in the list of Gospels, something confirmed by the Gospel's prologue, which refers to "many others" who have also written narratives of Christ, among whom would certainly be Matthew and Mark. This dating puts Matthew and Mark no later than 60. Ricciotti argues for the following dates: Matthew 50-55; Mark 55-60; Luke c. 60; John c. 100.²⁰

(2) *Argument from history.* Anglican bishop J.A.T. Robinson, well-known for the theological liberalism of his book *Honest to God* (1963), in an epoch-making work *Redating the New Testament*, came to the conclusion that the late dating of the Gospels by the school of 'form criticism' is totally dependent upon "the manifold tyranny of unexamined assumptions."²¹ Robinson begins his study by noting that in the entire New Testament, "the single most datable and climactic event of the period—the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and with it the collapse of institutional Judaism based on the temple—is never once mentioned as a past

¹⁵ See Acts 15:22-23; 2 Cor 12:17-18; Eph 6:21-22.

¹⁶ See Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 2:2; 3:17; Philem 19.

¹⁷ *Neue Untersuchungen zur Apostelgesch. und zur Abfassung. der Syn. Evang.*, 1911; *The Date of Acts and the Synoptic Gospels*, Williams & Norgate, London, and Putnam, N.Y., 1911.

¹⁸ *Theologische Quartalsch.*, Tübingen 1929, IV, pp.443-4

¹⁹ See a list of fifteen scholars in J. Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1991, p.299.

²⁰ *The Life of Christ*, Bruce, Milwaukee 1947, pp.98-141

²¹ *Redating the New Testament*, SCM Press, London 1976, p.345

fact.”²² He proposes the following dates: Matthew 40-60; Mark 45-60; Luke 57-60; John 40-65; and indeed he dates the entire New Testament before the year 70.²³

(3) *Argument from early patristic tradition combined with internal comparison of the Gospels.* Anglican canon, and Professor of New Testament Greek, John Wenham, arguing from the likenesses and differences between the Synoptic Gospels, and early tradition regarding their order and place of writing, concludes that the Gospel of St Matthew was written around 40, St Mark about 45, St Luke by the mid-50s, and Acts of the Apostles in 62. Early Fathers and writers are unanimous in asserting that St Matthew wrote first, and in a Hebrew tongue. Those who say so include Papias, Irenaeus, Pantaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Cyril of Jerusalem. Later writers say the same: St Gregory Nazianzus, St John Chrysostom, St Augustine, St Jerome.²⁴

(4) *Argument from Jewish oral and written tradition.* Swedish Biblicist, Birger Gerhardsson, demonstrates the reliability of the sayings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels from the teaching and memorisation methods of the Jewish rabbis and disciples at the time of Christ.²⁵ “Turning to Jesus’ oral teaching, we must reckon with the fact that he used a method similar to that of Jewish—and Hellenistic—teachers: the scheme of text and interpretation. He must have made his disciples learn sayings off by heart; if he taught, he must have required his disciples to memorize.”²⁶ The same evidence has been presented by Harald Riesenfeld,²⁷ also of Sweden, and Thorleif Boman of Norway. French scholar Marcel Jousse in his own studies demonstrated the Semitic characteristics and rhythm of the sayings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. Other scholars point also to the wide use of shorthand and the carrying of notebooks in the Graeco-Roman world, the practice in schools of circulating lecture notes, and the common practice among the disciples of rabbis to make notes of their sayings.²⁸

(5) *Argument from Hebrew basis of the texts.* French scholar Jean Carmignac was struck by the Semitisms (Hebrew or Semitic way of writing and speaking) of the Greek text of St Mark’s Gospel when in 1963 he began to translate it into Hebrew. His work *The Birth of the Synoptic Gospels* summarises twenty years of research on the Hebrew language background to the Gospels. Carmignac names forty-nine scholars who uphold the Semitic origin of one or other of the Gospels. He adduces multiple examples of Semitisms, and divides them into nine categories: Semitisms of borrowing, imitation, thought, vocabulary, syntax, style, composition, transmission, and translation. In essence, he demonstrates that the Synoptic Gospels can only have taken shape in the Jewish culture of the first half of the 1st century A.D., and thus they evince the authenticity of their content and origin. “In short, the latest dates that can be admitted are around 50 for Mark ... around 55 for Completed Mark; around 55-60 for Matthew; between 58 and 60 for Luke. But the earliest dates are clearly more probable: Mark around 42; Completed Mark around 45; (Hebrew) Matthew around 50; (Greek) Luke a little after 50.”²⁹ Based upon the same arguments, French philosopher and specialist in Hebrew thought Claude Tresmontant proposes the following dates: Matthew before 36, Mark 50-60, and Luke 40-60.³⁰

Maurice Casey of Nottingham University uses the Aramaic Dead Sea Scrolls to reconstruct Aramaic sources of parts of St Mark’s Gospel, and proposes a date of about 40 A.D. for that Gospel.³¹

The Hebrew origins of our Greek manuscripts have been studied by scholars in Jerusalem such as Robert Lindsey, David Flusser, Pinchas Lapide and David Bivin. Lindsey comments, “My own encounter with the strong Hebraism of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke came several years ago when I had occasion to attempt the translation of the Gospel of Mark to Hebrew.”³² What first caught my attention was the very Hebraic word order of the Greek text of Mark. Usually I only needed to find the correct Hebrew equivalents to the Greek words in order to give good sense and understanding to the text. In other words, the syntax or word relationships were just such as one would expect in Hebrew.”³³ The Greek text reads like a word-for-word translation of a Hebrew text. At times, obscure phrases in Greek can be understood by translating back into Hebrew, thus arriving at a Hebrew idiom or term or saying whose meaning was lost in translation. St Jerome³⁴ says that he himself made a copy of the Hebrew original of a ‘Gospel according to

²² Idem, p.13

²³ Idem, p.352

²⁴ *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke*, op. cit., London 1991

²⁵ *Memory and Manuscript. Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, Gleerup, Uppsala, Sweden 1961; *Préhistoire des Évangiles*, Cerf, Paris 1981; *The Gospel Tradition*, Gleerup, Lund 1986

²⁶ *Memory and Manuscript*, op. cit., p.328

²⁷ *The Gospel Tradition*, Blackwell, Oxford 1970

²⁸ R.H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St Matthew’s Gospel*, Brill, Leiden 1967; E.J. Goodspeed, *Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist*, Winston, Philadelphia 1959; R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, Mohr, Tübingen 1988

²⁹ *The Birth of the Synoptic Gospels*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1987, p.61. Cf. also Id., *Recherches sur le Notre Père*, Éditions Letouzey & Ané, 1969, pp.29-52.

³⁰ *The Hebrew Christ. Language in the Age of the Gospels*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1989, p.324

³¹ *Aramaic Sources of Mark’s Gospel*, Cambridge Uni. Press, U.K. 1998, p.259

³² *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark*, 2nd. ed., Jerusalem 1973

³³ Foreword to D. Bivin & R. Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus: New Insights from a Hebraic Perspective*, Rev. ed., Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, Dayton, Ohio 1994

³⁴ *De Viribus Illustribus* (On Outstanding Men) ch. 3

the Hebrews?—a work, now lost, which scholars judge to be akin to St Matthew's Gospel. Other ancient writers, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius and Epiphanius, attest to the same or a similar work.³⁵

(6) *Argument from internal comparison of language.* French Biblical scholar Philippe Rolland argues, as Ricciotti, for the early dating of Acts, and contends that falsification of the facts by Luke was completely impossible, given that many readers and listeners to Acts were eyewitnesses to the events described therein. He accepts the basic argument of J. Robinson regarding the fall of Jerusalem. He then demonstrates the similarity of language between the discourses of St Peter in the Acts of the Apostles and the two epistles by him. He demonstrates likewise the similarity of language between the discourses of St Paul in the Acts of the Apostles and the several epistles by him. He proposes the following dates: Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew, A.D. 40; Greek translation of Matthew, and Gospel of Luke, 63 or 64; Mark, 66 or 67; John, towards 100.³⁶ These dates are accepted and proposed by Italian Biblical, Oriental and Patristic scholar, Tommaso Federici.³⁷

(7) *Argument from dating of papyri.* German papyrologist Carsten Peter Thiede examined three papyrus fragments of the Gospel of St Matthew—acquired in 1901 in Luxor, Egypt, and now kept at Magdalen College, Oxford—and concluded that they can be dated to about the year 60 A.D.³⁸

The reliability of the chief New Testament books established, we can now proceed to examine their contents with security.

³⁵ References given in W. Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. I, Westminster, Kentucky 1991, pp.134-78. Cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome*, Duckworth, London 1975, pp.65, 223; J. Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. I, p.111-2.

³⁶ *L'origine et la date des évangiles*, Éditions Saint-Paul, Paris 1994, pp.163-4

³⁷ *Resuscitò Cristo*, Eparchia di Piana d. albanesi, Palermo 1996, pp.166-7

³⁸ C.P. Thiede & M. d'Ancona, *Eyewitness to Jesus*, Doubleday, N.Y. 1996; *The Jesus Papyrus*, Phoenix, London 1997