

Reasons to Believe

Apologetics 101

Small Group Discussion:

➡ What questions do you have regarding the origins of the Bible?

➡ How would you respond to the following statements?

The Bible is just a bunch of myths that ignorant people believe in order to feel good about life.

The Bible has been used to justify great evils like the crusades, slavery, and the belittling of women.

What is the Bible?

➡ The word "bible" is the English form of the Greek word *biblia* meaning _____

➡ The Bible is a collection of _____

➡ It is divided into two sections: _____

➡ The word testament is a rendering of the Greek *diatheke* meaning _____

➡ The Old Testament is the covenant between God and _____

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates — the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites." Genesis 15:17–21

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you." Genesis 17:9–11

On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt —on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." Exodus 19:1–8

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. "Lord," he said, "if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance."

Then the LORD said: "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you. Obey what I command you today ..."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments. Exodus 34:8–11 & 27–28

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Jeremiah 31:31–34

➡ The New Testament is the covenant between God and _____

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." Matthew 26:26–29

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Paul – 1 Corinthians 11:23–26

But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said:

"The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear. Hebrews 8:6–13

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Hebrews 12:22–24

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. Paul – Romans 4:16–17

Is the Bible God's Revelation to Us?

➡ It is the claim of the biblical writers that scripture is _____ by God

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.
Peter – 2 Peter 1:20–21

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Paul – 2 Timothy 3:14–16

➡ The idea of biblical inspiration is that as the writers were writing their books or letters, God was actively involved in the process so that the final result was that what was written was considered to be the words of God

Inspiration is a work of God terminating, not in the men who were to write Scripture (as if, having given them an idea of what to say, God left them to themselves to find a way of saying it), but an actual written product. It is Scripture – *graphie*, the written text – that is God-breathed. The essential idea here is that all Scripture has the same character as the prophet's sermons had, both when preached and when written. That is to say, Scripture is not only man's word – the fruit of human thought, premeditation, and art – but also and equally God's word, spoken through man's lips or written with man's pen. In other words, Scripture has a double authorship, and man is only the secondary author; the primary author, through whose initiative, prompting, and enlightenment, and under whose superintendence each human writer did his work, is God the Holy Spirit.

J. I. Packer in *The Origin of the Bible* edited by Philip Comfort

➡ Jesus' view of scripture:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (*Deuteronomy 8:3*)

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" (*Psalms 91:11–12*)

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (*Deuteronomy 6:16*)

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" (*Deuteronomy 6:13*)

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Matthew 4:1–11

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?"

"The son of David," they replied.

He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,

"'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" (*Psalms 110:1*)

If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Matthew 22:41–46

➡ Peter's view of scripture:

2 Peter 1:20–21

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.
Peter – 2 Peter 3:15–16

➡ Paul's view of scripture:

2 Timothy 3:14–16

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For Scripture says, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," (*Deuteronomy 25:4*) and "The worker deserves his wages." (*Luke 10:7* - ?)
Paul – 1 Timothy 5:17–18

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.

Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Paul – 1 Corinthians 7:12 & 25 & 40

Why Do We Have These 66 Books?

➡ The 66 Books of the bible form the _____ of scripture

↳ The Greek word *kanon* means a _____ or _____ of measurement:

- Was it written by an _____?
- Had it been widely _____ by the churches over time?
- Was it in _____ with other texts?

One of the reasons the majority of ancient Christians rejected such Gospels (i.e., The Gospels of Thomas, Philip, Mary Magdelene, etc.) is that they seemed to appear out of nowhere. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had been known throughout the churches for 50–100 years, and then suddenly, one Christian group claims to have “discovered” a book written by Thomas or Judas or whomever. You can understand why the other churches might be suspicious, especially since these new “Gospels” bore a striking resemblance to the peculiar teachings of recent splinter groups and had little in common with the four earlier Gospels.

John Dickson – *The Christ Files: How Historians Know What They Know About Jesus*

➡ The Bible was _____ in the sense of being formally canonized at a church council in Carthage in AD 397

One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa – at Hippo Regius in 393 and at Carthage in 397 – but what these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities.

F. F. Bruce – *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*

- ↳ Why?
- To protect against _____
 - To aid in _____ efforts
 - Due to _____

The Uniqueness of the Bible:

- ➡ The Bible is a compilation of _____
- ➡ By _____ different _____
- ➡ From differing _____
- ➡ Written in _____ different _____
- ➡ On different _____
- ➡ Over a span of _____ years
- ➡ And, yet, the Bible reveals a _____ story

HOMEWORK:

➡ Read Handout: "The Christ Files" Chapters 5 & 6 by John Dickson

➡ Read Chapter 6 from "Know Why You Believe" by Paul Little

Chapter 5 of the book "The Christ Files" by John Dickson

Week 3 Homework Reading Assignment for Reasons to Believe Essentials

RECENTLY I WAS TALKING TO A HIGHLY INTELLIGENT WOMAN WHO asked me about the sources of our knowledge of Jesus. I took her through the Graeco-Roman and Jewish sources and then began to list the Christian ones. She stopped me and said, "But surely you can't use those. They were all written by religious believers." She thought that religious devotion disqualified Christian texts from being considered historical data.

Let me begin, then, by clearing up two major misunderstandings about the writings of the early Christians.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AS A HISTORICAL TEXT

First, the so-called "religious" nature of Christian writings in no way diminishes their value as historical sources. Historians take the Christian agenda into account when they analyse the New Testament, just as they take the imperial bias into account when studying Tacitus or the Jewish bias when reading Josephus, but historians do not place the New Testament in a special category.

John Dickson
with the original
Gutenberg Bible
Lambeth Place
Library, London



Actually, the writings of Tacitus and Josephus provide good illustrations of how complex biases can be. While Tacitus was proudly Roman, he was at the same time deeply critical of Roman tyranny as exemplified, in Tacitus' view, in the reign of Emperor Tiberius (AD 14–37). Reading Tacitus involves being aware of biases in both these directions. The same is true of Josephus. In some ways, the *Jewish Antiquities* is a defence of the Jewish people written in a period when the Jews were often the butt of Graeco-Roman ridicule. At the same time, Josephus was pro-Roman and wrote his works at the pleasure of the imperial court in Rome. His writings reflect both of these (competing) agenda. The agenda observable in the New Testament documents are no less complex. It is simplistic and unhistorical to say that Christian bias undermines the historical worth of the New Testament texts.

Professional scholars approach the New Testament as they would any other first-century text. They do not treat it as the Word of God, as the Christian church does, but they do accord it the status of a valuable historical text. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that historians (no matter what their persuasion) universally regard the New Testament writings as the earliest, most plentiful and most reliable sources of information about the Jesus of history. If readers are in any doubt about this, they should open up any of the major texts on the historical Jesus (listed in chapter 1, pages 22–23), and they will discover that, whereas the Graeco-Roman and Jewish sources just mentioned are treated in a matter of 10–20 pages (often less), the New Testament texts provide the principal data for the remaining several hundred pages.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AS A COMPILATION OF SOURCES

The second thing to say is that the New Testament is not a single source at all; it is a collection of sources. In the discipline known as “theology” (the study of God’s nature and activity) the Bible is appropriately treated as one homogenous source—all ultimately coming from God. Passages from one biblical writer are placed seamlessly next to passages from another in order to build up a coherent picture of the divine character and intentions. Sermons in church generally use Scripture in the same way. In historical research, however, the New Testament is analysed as a compila-

tion of *independent* traditions with common convictions about Jesus of Nazareth. Christians need to remember that, although our sacred documents were composed and circulated in the first century, they were not brought together into a single volume (the New Testament) until the third or fourth century.¹

How and by whom was the final New Testament collection decided? As the literature of the Christians grew, churches all around the Mediterranean decided to meet to discuss which texts were universally regarded as sacred and authoritative. A series of representative councils was called, climaxing in the councils of Rome (AD 382) and Carthage in North Africa (AD 397). The policy of these councils was highly conservative. Basically, they decided to embrace as Scripture only those documents which had long been recognised throughout the churches as having been penned by first-generation Christian leaders, that is, by those whom Jesus appointed (Peter, Paul, James, etc.), or by their immediate colleagues (Mark, Luke, etc.). Thus, these councils culled rather than included, leaving us with the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The writings that did not make it into the New Testament (Didache, Epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas and others) were published in separate collections and are all readily available in English translations today.²

The important point for now is that the New Testament is not a single document but a compilation of texts composed and circulated *independently* of each other in the first century. This is historically significant. The apostle Paul, who wrote numerous documents now in the New Testament, never knew, for instance, the Gospel of Mark (and Mark never knew Paul’s letters either). Historians therefore treat his epistles as a source *separate* from that of Mark.³ Again, the Gospel of John was composed *independently* of the Gospel of Matthew, so these individual Gospels represent another set of separate sources. James—the brother of Jesus mentioned earlier—did not know any of these Gospels (he was martyred before any of them was written), so his letter constitutes yet another source.⁴ I am sure you get the picture.

For the general public, the fact that two or three parts of the New Testament say the same thing about Jesus probably does not seem all that significant. This is because most of us, if we ever ponder these things, are used to thinking about the New Testament as a single document. Historians view it quite differ-

ently. The fact that Paul and Mark, and Matthew and John, wrote independently of each other makes their strikingly similar statements about Jesus' life and teaching highly significant. Because we know they did not copy from each other, we have to assume their information was both early and widely known. This is a basic principle of historical study called the *criterion of multiple attestation*, which I will say more about at the end of the chapter.

I want now to offer a brief account of these sources within the New Testament. I suspect some Christians will feel uncomfortable with what might seem a dissection of their sacred text. I would ask for a little patience. What follows is not intended as a *theological* account of Scripture (which would proceed in a very different way); it is merely a kind of inventory of the major historical strands detected in the New Testament by mainstream scholars. In the historical analysis of Jesus, there are six or seven important New Testament sources.

THE LETTERS OF THE APOSTLE PAUL (WRITTEN AD 48 – 64)

Paul was a one-time Jerusalem Pharisee (Jewish sectarian) and opponent of the Jesus movement. He was converted to Christ through witnessing what he claims was the risen Jesus himself. His was the original "Damascus Road" experience.⁵ Paul's many letters to the recently established churches around the Mediterranean treat various theological and ethical topics relevant to the rapidly growing Christian movement. They were written between AD 48–64.⁶ Paul occasionally refers in passing to details about Jesus with which his audience was already well acquainted:

1. Jesus' descent from King David
2. The name and status of Jesus' brother (James)
3. Jesus' instructions to missionaries
4. Jesus' teachings about marriage, love and the treatment of enemies
5. Jesus' last supper
6. Jesus' betrayal
7. Jesus' execution and burial
8. Jesus' resurrection from the dead
9. Jesus' post-death appearances to eyewitnesses (and Paul)
10. Jesus' status as the Messiah-Christ⁷

EPISTLE OF JAMES (WRITTEN SOMETIME BETWEEN AD 50 – 62)

James, as I have already said, was one of Jesus' brothers. Not only was he a reported eyewitness to Jesus' resurrection, he emerged as the leader of Christianity in Jerusalem—a rather daunting task and one for which he paid with his life in AD 62.

James wrote one letter now collected in the New Testament. It is a rich source of remembrances and restatements of Jesus' words. Consider the following piece of Jesus' teaching preserved independently in both the Gospel of Matthew and the letter of James:

Matthew 5:34–37	James 5:12
Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool.... Simply let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No"; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.	Do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.

The letter of James contains more allusions to the sayings of Jesus than any other New Testament document outside the four Gospels.⁸ James obviously cherished his brother's teachings.⁹

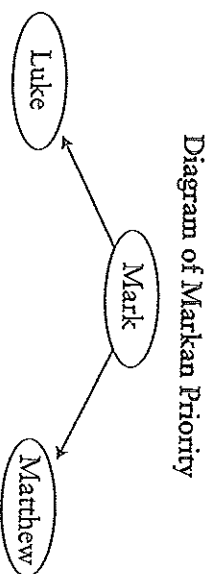
THE GOSPEL OF MARK (WRITTEN AD 65 – 75)

Although Mark was not an eyewitness himself, he was probably the colleague and interpreter of the apostle Peter (one of the leading eyewitnesses). This detail is gleaned from the words of a near contemporary of Mark named Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis (AD 60–130) who reported:

Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15).¹⁰

It seems that close to the time of the great apostle's death (about AD 64) Mark wrote down in Greek a record of Peter's teaching about the life and teaching of Jesus. The result was what we call the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four Gospels in the judgment of most scholars.

Those vaguely familiar with Christianity might expect me at this point to talk about the other three Gospels—the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John.¹¹ However, biblical historians approach the next three Gospels not as three entirely independent sources but as three independent *combinations* of sources. What do I mean by this? Put simply, when Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels they appear to have used the Gospel already written by Mark. Huge sections of Matthew and Luke correspond (almost) precisely to the wording of Mark. This convinces most biblical historians (but not all) that Matthew and Luke relied heavily on the Gospel of Mark. Indeed, about 80 percent of Mark's Gospel appears virtually unchanged in Matthew's Gospel and about 60 percent of Mark is found in Luke. The following diagram describes what I am talking about:



In writing their Gospels, Matthew and Luke appear to have borrowed heavily from the Gospel of Mark. This would not have been considered plagiarism in the ancient world; rather it was respectful reliance on earlier authoritative sources. To give you a taste, what follows is a section of Mark's Gospel (2:13–17) that appears almost word for word in the Gospels of Matthew (9:9–13) and Luke (5:27–32):

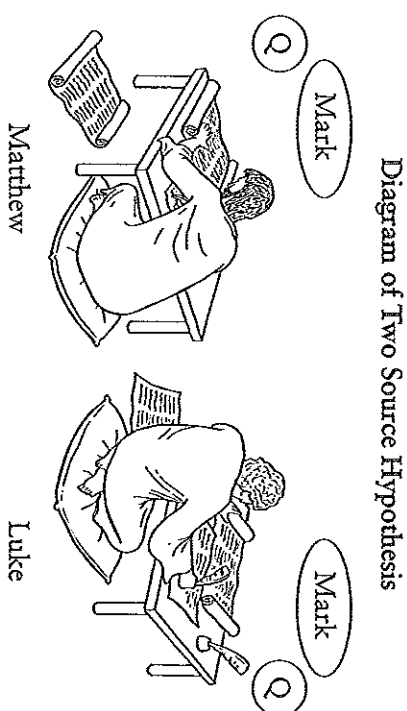
Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed

him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

But Matthew and Luke had access to sources in addition to Mark, and I want to turn to these now.

QUELLE (COMPOSED AD 40–70)

A lot of the material common to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke is *not* found in the Gospel of Mark. This leads to one of two conclusions: either (a) one borrowed from the other (Matthew from Luke or Luke from Matthew) or (b) each writer had access to another source in addition to Mark's Gospel. Most scholars reject the first possibility because there are too many differences between Matthew and Luke to accept that one copied from the other. Thus, a majority of experts go for option b: independently of each other, Matthew and Luke used another source. Scholars call this second source Q. "Q" stands for the German word *Quelle*, meaning—you guessed it—"source." Let me put all of this in another diagram:



So, what was in Q? Lots. According to most scholars, this shared source contained large blocks of Jesus' teaching, including parables, proverbs and various disputes with religious leaders. Q also contained references to Jesus' healings and his unique status as an agent of God. To give you a taste, here is a portion of Jesus' teaching recorded in Luke (12:22–31 below) and Matthew (6:25–33) which comes from their shared source, Q:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no store-room or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Virtually all of Q is like this. It appears to have been an early written collection of the sayings of Jesus—a kind of quote book. Scholars sometimes refer to it as a “sayings source.”

Some mainstream scholars take the discussion of Q too far. It has even become fashionable for some to analyse the content of Matthew and Luke's shared source so as to reconstruct an entire profile of a so-called “Q community”—the Christian community that preserved the source (for example, John Kloppenborg Verbin's *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel*, Fortress Press, 2000). However, without knowing that the Q document was the *only* account of Jesus in such a community's possession (which is extremely unlikely based on everything else we know about early Christianity), how could we reconstruct what the “Q Christians” were like? This is a case of scholar-

ship thinking too long with too little to go on. Oxford University scholar Christopher Tuckett gives a more measured discussion of Q in *Q and the History of Early Christianity* (T & T Clark, 1996).

SPECIAL “L” (COMPOSED AD 40–70)

Luke's Gospel was probably completed sometime between AD 70–80 and, in addition to the author's own editorial work, appears to combine at least three sources: the Gospel of Mark and Q, as I have just said, and another source known simply as L. “L” stands for *Luke's special source*.

When scholars speak about L they are not referring to Luke's personal contributions, such as when he adds his own comment about Jesus or when he introduces a section from Mark or Q in his own words. These editorial sections display their own literary and grammatical style. L, on the other hand, is the name given to the bits of Luke's Gospel which are found *only* in his Gospel and which do not display the author's trademark style.

L accounts for about one third of the material in Luke's Gospel and includes some of the most memorable teachings and descriptions of Jesus, particularly his friendships with sinners. For example, L contains the parables of the Good Samaritan (10:30–37) and the Prodigal Son (15:11–32), as well as the narrative of Christ forgiving a prostitute (7:36–50). None of the L material, for example Luke 19:1–10 here, appears in the other three Gospels:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to murmur, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions

to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

POSSIBLE SPECIAL "M" (COMPOSED AD 40 – 80)

Matthew's Gospel was probably completed sometime around AD 80. While it is unlikely, in the opinion of most scholars, that the apostle Matthew himself wrote the Gospel bearing his name, much of the distinctive material may originally have come from the apostle via a Christian community strongly influenced by his teachings. This would explain why the words *EUANGELION KATA MATTHAION* ("The Gospel According to Matthew") appear in the earliest manuscript copies of the Gospel. Indeed, no other name than Matthew was ever connected with this Gospel, indicating that from the beginning the church believed this work to have derived somehow from the apostle himself.

The final author of the Gospel of Matthew may have had access to his own special source (called M). Again, this is a source in addition to Mark, Q and his own editorial work. The following text (Matthew 25:31–40), quoting Jesus, is often classified M:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to

drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

I say Matthew *may* have had access to a special source because the case for M is not as strong as the case for L. While there is plenty of content in Matthew that is unique to that Gospel (such as the above passage), the material is not all of the same style and perspective. This makes it difficult to speak confidently of a single unified source. Scholars continue to debate the question, some ruling out the existence of M altogether and others (perhaps most) preferring to use the letter "M" as a convenient way of referring to material that may have come to the writer of Matthew through a number of written or spoken sources.

"SIGNS SOURCE" (COMPOSED SOMETIME AROUND AD 70)

Most New Testament experts believe that John's Gospel was the last to be written. Few think the apostle John himself composed the work, but most believe an editor and/or community loyal to John's teachings was responsible for its final publication, probably between AD 80–100. That said, an earlier source is usually detected within the Gospel. The source focuses on the miracles or "signs" of Jesus pointing to his status as Messiah. It is therefore known as the Signs Source or SQ for short (SQ = *Semeia Quelle*) and is dated about AD 70. The famous "water into wine" miracle, which appears only in John's Gospel (2:1–11), is usually believed to have come from SQ:

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the

servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realise where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

MULTIPLE SOURCES AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

At this point some Christian readers may be feeling a little uncomfortable with all this talk about multiple sources behind the Gospels. Let me try to put minds at rest by pointing out that one of the Gospel writers himself highlights for his readers his use of earlier sources. In the introduction to his Gospel, Luke tells his patron, Theophilus, to whom the volume is dedicated, that he has written his work only after careful research into a number of prior sources, both written and spoken:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1–4).

Whatever else this is, it is an affirmation of Luke's knowledge and use of earlier sources about Jesus. The sources are of two types: (1) other written accounts, of which Luke says there were "many" at the time of writing, and (2) traditions coming from "eyewitnesses" and "servants of the word." This latter source is what modern scholars call "oral tradition," memorised reports of the things Jesus did and said in the presence of his followers (oral tradition will be discussed in the next chapter). Luke was well

placed to write an "orderly account" of these things since, as a highly educated travelling companion of the apostle Paul, he had both research ability and access to important material.¹² In any case, the point is this: although not motivated by Luke's introductory statement, modern scholars' identification and analysis of Gospel sources (Mark, Q, L, M and SQ) are entirely consistent with what Luke himself affirms.

There is something quite instructive here about the distinctive nature of the New Testament when compared with the Scriptures of other world faiths. The Islamic holy book the Quran, for instance, is said to be a direct revelation from God entirely devoid of human participation in its composition. It is believed to be a perfect copy of a "Mother Quran" stored in heaven. The prophet Muhammad merely *recited* what was divinely dictated to him (*quran* means "recitation"). The earliest and most sacred portion of the Hindu Scriptures, called the Vedas, are likewise believed to have been eternally and divinely disclosed.

Christian Scripture is quite different. The books of the New Testament have always been recognised as *historical* texts. They are *letters* written to specific social settings and *biographies* based on earlier sources.¹³ Does this observation undermine the Christian belief that the New Testament is also God's Word? Not at all. From the very beginning, Christians treated their sacred documents as both human and divine. Just as Christian theology thinks of Jesus as both God and man, so the church has (usually) had no hesitation affirming the New Testament as both a divinely inspired text and a truly historical text.

The New Testament asks the devout believer to read its text and hear the voice of God, but it also invites the curious historian to explore its origins and assess its claims. The first step in that exploration is the analysis of sources.

MULTIPLE SOURCES AND THE HISTORIAN

What is the significance of identifying all of these independent historical sources within and behind the New Testament? Put simply, whenever historians are trying to build up a picture of some event or person from the past, they begin by sorting out how many independent sources attest to that event or person. The more independent sources there are, the more confident historians

feel about reconstructing the past. As noted earlier in the book, this is generally known as the "criterion of multiple attestation."

The criterion of multiple attestation affirms that when numerous ancient sources *independently* offer roughly the same portrait of an event or person that portrait takes on greater plausibility. It is the same logic you would apply to some surprising news from friends. If the same news came from two or three different friends (and you knew they had not colluded), you would be far more likely to take them at their word.

This is not to say that scholars happily accept everything they find in multiple sources and immediately reject things they find only in one source. Historical study is more complex than that. Historians use some additional criteria to assess historical sources.

1. THE CRITERION OF COHERENCE

When an episode or teaching in the Gospels fits well with what we already confidently know about Jesus' life, it is generally deemed highly plausible. To offer an example, the Gospels report some dramatic clashes between Jesus and the religious aristocracy of Jerusalem. Consider the following:

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers'" (Mark 11:15–17).

How can historians be confident this episode took place? One way is by asking: does this event fit well with those parts of Jesus' life that are considered historically secure? The answer in this case is a very firm yes. Scholars are highly confident that the Jerusalem elite ordered the arrest and execution of Jesus of Nazareth: both Christian and non-Christian sources affirm this. Because Jesus' condemnation of the temple officials coheres so well with—indeed, it goes a long way to explaining—what we know of his eventual fate at the hands of these authorities, an event such as the one described above takes on increased plausibility in the minds of historians.

2. THE CRITERION OF DISSIMILARITY

When a deed or saying of Jesus recorded in the Gospels cannot be said to have derived from the beliefs and practices of either Judaism or the early church, it is often deemed highly reliable. The logic here is that such a saying or deed is unlikely to have been invented. Jesus' blanket prohibition of oaths provides a good example (Matthew 5:33–37). The criterion of dissimilarity has its limitations since Jesus cannot be divorced from either Judaism or the early church. He was a Jew, after all, and his influence on the early church was obviously massive. The criterion has positive force—that is, when a deed or saying of Jesus can be shown *not* to have derived from Judaism *nor* from the early church, we may be confident the Gospel writer did not invent it. However, it has no negative weight: aspects of Jesus' life, which do have parallels in Judaism or the early church, cannot be considered unhistorical because of this.

3. THE CRITERION OF ARCHAIC STYLE

The Gospels were composed in Greek, but Jesus spoke in Aramaic. Episodes or teachings in the Gospels which display a strongly Aramaic style (even though written in Greek) are generally regarded as older; that is, they were composed closer in time to Jesus himself. The famous Lord's Prayer (or Our Father) found in Matthew 6:9–13 displays several such Aramaisms. Readers may be surprised to learn that there are numerous books exploring the Aramaic background of the Gospels and of the New Testament more broadly. One of the most important is by US scholar Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1997). Actually, this volume combines two books on the topic by Prof Fitzmyer. Warning: it is not for the fainthearted.

4. THE CRITERION OF EMBARRASSMENT

Episodes in the Gospels that probably would have caused some embarrassment to the Christians who recorded the event are generally given great weight. The assumption here is that Christians are unlikely to have made up such stories (in this way, the criterion of embarrassment is akin to the criterion of dissimilarity). A good example is Jesus' unusually strong rebuke of the apostle Peter, one of the heroes of the early church:

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:33).

Another important example is the place of women in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection. According to the Gospels, the first witnesses to the resurrection were not the male apostles but Jesus' female disciples.¹⁴ This might not strike a modern person as significant, but historians are intrigued. It is well known that a woman's testimony was little valued in the first century and had (at best) ambiguous legal status. Given that the Gospels were written in order to convince first-century readers about Jesus Christ, it is astonishing that they would all report this rather embarrassing detail. The only explanation is that the stories of the women witnesses to the resurrection were very early and widely known. The Gospel writers certainly did not make them up.

5. THE CRITERION OF MEMORABILITY

Sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels which are inherently memorable are more likely to have been passed on accurately by his disciples. This is the criterion of memorability. A good example is found in Matthew 5:39: "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Other sayings are memorable not simply because they are surprising, such as the above example, but because they have been formed *memorically*, that is, with a view to ongoing memorisation, a common practice in ancient teaching. Consider the saying from Jesus in Matthew 6:19–20:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and rust destroy,
and where thieves break in and steal.
But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where moth and rust do not destroy,
and where thieves do not break in and steal.

6. THE CRITERION OF DATE

Sayings and episodes contained in earlier sources are frequently considered more reliable than those contained in later sources. So, for example, many scholars would place greater

weight on the material about Jesus found in Q (Matthew and Luke's shared source) than in, say, the Signs Source (SQ) of John's Gospel. The logic is simple: the less time there is between an event and its written record, the less chance there is that an account has been diminished or embellished.¹⁵

We must not make too much of this criterion, however. As we will see in the next chapter, *written* reports were not the primary means of preserving and passing on important information in the first century. To ancient minds, a properly memorised *verbal* account could be of equal, if not superior, value to an earlier *written* account. The reason for this is simple, as I will make clear.

CHAPTER 6 **BEFORE THE GOSPELS**
JESUS IN ORAL TRADITION

Chapter 6 of the book
"The Christ Files" by John
Dickson

Week 3

Homework Reading Assignment
for Reasons to Believe Essentials

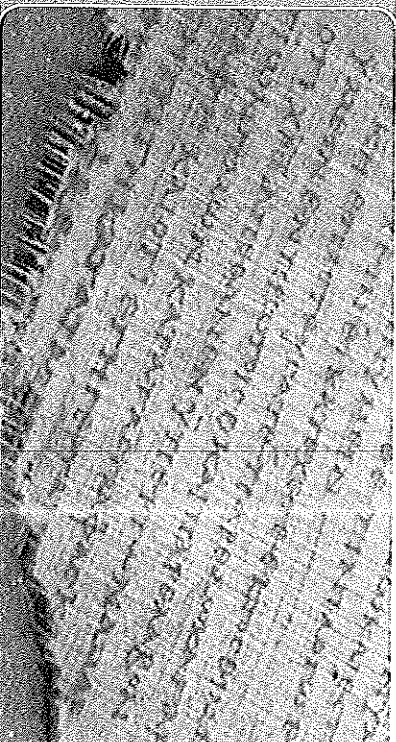
BEHIND ALL THIS TALK OF MULTIPLE WRITTEN SOURCES IS A MORE fundamental idea that has to be considered when assessing the historical data about Jesus Christ. Much of the material drawn together in the Gospels (sometime after about AD 65) was preserved initially in what is called oral tradition.

WHY WERE THE GOSPELS WRITTEN SO LATE?

I have often been asked: why did it take so long for the stories about Jesus to be written down (in the Gospels)? Part of the answer is that actually, it did not take long at all. In ancient terms, a gap of forty years between an event and the first full written account is not considered lengthy, as long as the account is discernibly based on earlier sources.

To offer three sacred comparisons: (1) the earliest biography of the founder of Islam, Muhammad (AD 570–632), was composed around AD 760, 125 years after his death, and continued to be edited for another fifty years; (2) the first written records of the

The earliest
manuscript of
1 Corinthians 15
Chester Beatty
Library, Dublin



life and sermons of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha: 448–368 BC) appeared 350 years after his death; (3) the teachings and stories of the most famous of ancient Israel's rabbis, a great scholar named Hillel who died early in the first century AD, appeared in writing for the first time in the Mishnah, composed about AD 200. Nevertheless, scholars still treat these writings as serious historical texts.

The Gospels were written within 40–60 years of Jesus' death. The sources they rely on date from the decade or two before that. And, as I said previously, Paul's letters were written earlier still. These establish beyond doubt that Jesus' teachings, death and resurrection, together with his status as Messiah-Christ, were being taught by missionaries and committed to memory by Christians in the early 30s AD.

The question nevertheless remains: if the news about Jesus was being broadcast so early on, why did it take three decades or more before it was formally *written down*? The question and its answer reveal a fundamental difference between modern society and ancient society.

Today, we think of *writing* as the best way to preserve and disseminate important information – we produce textbooks, publish newspapers, and post web pages or blog online. If you want to broadcast something, you put it on paper or in a computer file for others to *read*. We are a “literary” society: that is the way we think.

For most of world history this was simply *not* the case. Before the invention of the printing press (fifteenth century) and the explosion of literacy it ignited, human societies were principally *aural* societies. This means they learnt important material not by reading it but by *hearing* it. Keep in mind that only about 10–15 percent of people in the first-century Mediterranean world could read.¹ Before our print culture, and especially in first-century Palestine, people published and preserved their traditions using centuries-old techniques of *verbal* transmission and memorisation. Scholars call this oral tradition.

The term “oral tradition” can be used of both the *process* and *content* of the transmission. In talking about early Christianity, then, scholars will often say things like, “Teachers in early Christianity played a central role in the community’s *oral tradition*,”

that is, the process of passing on reports about Jesus. Or they will say, “The first Christian communities regularly rehearsed their *oral tradition*,” that is, the content of reports about Jesus. To make it more confusing, the content of the oral tradition is sometimes called the Jesus tradition. This is a catch-all term for the *whole body of fixed recollections about Jesus* passed on in the first Christian communities. You will come across the expression “Jesus tradition” many more times in this book.

The important point is that in a period when few people could read (and even fewer owned books), writing things down was *not* the most effective way to preserve and promote material intended for the masses. The most practical and trusted means was through oral tradition.

JESUS REMEMBERED

How did recollections about Jesus become *fixed* in the memories of the early Christians? Were they simply retold the way we might spin a yarn in the pub or spread a rumour around the office? Not quite.

Some scholars argue that Christians borrowed the methods of ancient Jewish synagogue schools.² Here, students were required to learn (aurally) huge amounts of legal and moral teaching. To achieve this, quite sophisticated memorisation devices were used (called mnemonics), as well as good old-fashioned repetition. It was not unlike the way primary school students used to learn their times tables – I can still hear my classmates chanting “five nines are 45, six nines are 54....”

Was this how the Christians remembered the Jesus tradition? The first Christians were all Jews so, on the face of it, it is extremely likely they inherited much of this Jewish commitment to reciting oral tradition. Most scholars, however, suspect the Jesus tradition was passed on less formally. Christianity was a grassroots movement between AD 30–60, so it is difficult to imagine “Christian schools” with the same level of infrastructure as their Jewish counterparts. In any case, the Jesus tradition was tiny compared with the oral tradition of Jewish schools. While Christians were preserving material concerning just one rabbi, Jews in this period were trying to remember traditions relating to more than 150 rabbis from 50 BC–AD 200.

Interestingly, just as the Jesus tradition was written down in due course (in the Gospels), so this vast oral tradition of the Jews was eventually compiled in a book. Around AD 200 the leader of the Jews of Palestine, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, decided to bring into one volume all of the “traditions of the elders” as they were preserved in the memories of his fellow rabbis. The end result of his collection of oral tradition was a book known as the *Mishnah*, which means “repetition” – repetition was a principal means of memorising and passing on the traditions. About 150 rabbis are quoted in the *Mishnah*. My copy runs to 1,100 pages. To this day, Orthodox Jews regard the *Mishnah* as a sacred text, second only to the *Tanakh* (or what Christians call the Old Testament).³ In any case, the point is worth pondering: while the first Christians probably did not have the formal schools of the Jews, they would not have needed them since the size of their oral tradition was tiny compared to that compiled in the *Mishnah*. The Jesus tradition, you could say, did not need quite as much hard disc space or RAM.

So, how *did* the Christian oral tradition work? Leading the charge in the modern study of ancient oral tradition as it relates to the study of Jesus is Prof James Dunn of the University of Durham (UK). Dunn has published a 1,000-page volume aptly titled *Jesus Remembered*.⁴ Here, he sets forth an impressive case for what he calls “informal, controlled oral tradition.” Drawing on both biblical scholarship and modern studies in “orality” (how spoken traditions are maintained by cultures) Dunn emphasises that, while the Jesus tradition was probably not passed on in the manner of formal Jewish schools, it does show all the signs of having been strictly controlled in its central content.

From the very beginning—even during Jesus’ lifetime—Christians were devoted to preserving and proclaiming everything they could take in of the stories and teachings of their leader. They continually repeated these traditions and celebrated, discussed and obeyed them. The very word “disciple,” the key term for a follower of Jesus in the Gospels, literally means “learner.” It implies a commitment to studying the words and deeds of the master.

In addition, certain individuals from among the disciples were charged with particular responsibility for protecting and passing

on the Jesus tradition. These were called the “teachers.” To quote Dunn:

Teachers, indeed, seem to have been the first regularly paid ministry within the earliest Christian movement. Why teachers? Why else than to serve as the congregation’s repository of oral tradition? ... We should pause at this point to recall just how crucial teachers were to ancient communities. All who read these pages will have been bred to a society long accustomed to being able to rely on textbooks, encyclopaedias, and other reference works. But an ancient oral society had few if any such resources and had to rely instead on individuals whose role in their community was to function ... as “a walking reference library.”⁵

Perhaps an analogy will help. The closest thing to oral tradition in modern culture would have to be pop music. If you are anything like me, you know by heart the words to a great many songs. We learnt these over the years, not by poring over the lyric sheet printed on the CD sleeve, but by listening to the songs over and over, singing along to them, performing them in the shower and maybe even crooning them with friends late at night. These songs lodged in our heads without us even trying. We are preservers of an “oral tradition.”

I realise the analogy is not perfect: for one thing, the Jesus tradition was not set to music, and it certainly had more content than the Top 20 hits. But what the Jesus tradition lacked in tunefulness and brevity is more than made up for by the fact that it was first passed on in a truly *aural* culture. Those who preserved the stories and teachings of Jesus were well used to hearing important information and committing it to memory. It was the air they breathed, and we catch a whiff of this in the modern love for pop music. Illustrative of the aural environment in which Jesus taught and his disciples learnt is the fact that many of the stories and teachings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels contain ancient memory devices (called mnemonics) designed to enhance oral transmission. These include keyword repetition, punch lines, parallelism, humour, hyperbole and even rhyme.

For accuracy’s sake, I should probably extend my pop music analogy a little more. Imagine that when we first heard our Top

20 songs we sincerely believed they were the keys to life—both now and forever. How much more eagerly do you think we might have committed them to memory? Imagine further that our closest friends and family all shared the same Top 20 and that we regularly got together to sing the songs and discuss their meaning—all the time being coached by our local maestro, our “teacher.” I suspect we would be able to expand our collective repertoire to fifty or 100 songs, all maintained aurally without needing to write down the lyrics.

Something similar to this has to be imagined in order to understand what went on in the earliest gatherings of Christians. They cherished and rehearsed the message of Jesus and regularly listened to the explanations of the teachers, believing this material to be the key to eternal life.

Another analogy to oral tradition is modern joke telling. Very few of us ever *read* jokes out of a book; we hear and retell them, and that is how they lodge in our memories. Imagine belonging to a joke-telling club that met regularly to rehearse everyone’s all-time favourite gags (not my thing really, but hopefully you can see the point). For the first Christians living in an aural culture, the stories and teachings of Jesus had *at least* the memorability of a good modern joke.

Probably the most important evidence and example of Christian oral tradition is found in one of Paul’s letters. Although the letter itself is dated to about AD 55 (twenty-five years after Jesus), the significant thing is that in it Paul quotes the earliest known verbal summary (or creed) of Christian belief:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:

that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living,

though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (1 Corinthians 15:1–8).

In the opinion of most mainstream scholars the indented words in the passage come from a fixed narrative-summary of Christ’s death and resurrection composed sometime before AD 35, within just a few years of the events themselves. The reason for this dating is simple. Not only does Paul indicate that he handed this creed to the Corinthians when they first learnt about Christ from Paul (which we know was AD 50), he states that he himself “received” this verbal summary when he learnt of Christ, which we can date to between AD 31–34. This creed, then, and all of Paul’s passing references to Jesus, provide clear evidence that what was eventually written down in detail in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (sometime between AD 60s–90s) was already being preached by missionaries and committed to memory by Christians decades earlier (between AD 30–50).⁶ Oral tradition was the bridge between the original eye-witnesses and the written New Testament.

THE IMPERFECTIONS OF MEMORY

No one argues (on historical grounds) that the Jesus tradition was preserved word perfect. It was not. The Gospels themselves provide evidence for “informal, controlled oral tradition.” Let me offer two examples of where oral tradition has left us with strikingly similar, yet obviously different, accounts of particular events in Jesus’ life.

In the following example, Matthew and Luke describe a Roman centurion’s request for Jesus’ assistance.⁷ The differences as well as the similarities are fascinating:

Matthew 8:5–13

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralysed and in terrible suffering.” Jesus said to him, “I will go and heal him.” The centurion

Luke 7:1–10

When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and

replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

In Matthew's account the centurion comes to Jesus personally; in Luke's, some delegates are sent on his behalf. While the two accounts may be reconciled,⁸ the point is this: oral tradition is capable of either forgetting a detail (such as the sending of delegates) or deliberately removing it, with the result that when the story is next passed on certain (extraneous) elements have disappeared altogether.

But the differences are only part of the story, and a minor part at that. More obvious by far in the above accounts is the way the central elements of the narrative have been kept perfectly intact in Luke's and Matthew's retelling. As James Dunn explains:

sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

Here I would suggest is a fine example of oral traditioning, or if it is preferred, of Evangelists [the Gospel writers] writing the story in oral mode [i.e., as if speaking it to an audience]. The story was no doubt one which belonged to several communities' store of Jesus tradition. The story's point hangs entirely on the central exchange between Jesus and the centurion; that is maintained with care and accuracy.⁹

Another good example is found in the descriptions of the so-called Last Supper. Here the Gospel of Luke and a letter of Paul *independently* record their own renditions of the same oral tradition:

Luke 22:19–21
And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table."

1 Corinthians 11:23–25
For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians in about AD 55; Luke wrote his Gospel two decades later (and neither had access to the writings of the other). And yet, apart from a few minor variations, the same tradition about Jesus' final meal has been independently preserved with a high degree of accuracy. This was the task of oral tradition.

For the historian, then, the question "Why wasn't the Jesus tradition fully written down until the AD 60s–70s?" does not have quite the urgency it does in popular discussions. It would be like asking "Why weren't the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *New York Times* published on the Internet until the mid-1990s?" Nowadays, publishing online is the obvious thing to do. In the 1980s, however, the Internet was accessible only to a small minority of the population (mainly the US government and military). Back then it did not make sense to publish things online. Similarly, in

the first century *written documents* were accessible to only a tiny portion of the Graeco-Roman world. If you wanted to communicate with the masses, you did not publish books; you broadcast oral tradition, just as your forefathers had done for millennia.

The importance of *oral* tradition is underlined in an intriguing comment made by a Christian leader from the early second century. Papias lived from about AD 60–130 and was the Christian bishop of an area in western Turkey known as Hierapolis (modern Pamukkale). Writing 40–50 years after the first Gospels were published, Papias explains his ongoing preference for official *oral* recollections about Jesus over the *written* ones:

If anyone ever came who had followed the elders [those who knew the original apostles] I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, had said.... For I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4).

As strange as it sounds to modern ears, oral tradition was the preferred means of preserving and passing on important information in the ancient world. For Papias, a literate leader of early Christianity, it even trumped the written Gospels.

WHY WERE THE GOSPELS WRITTEN SO SOON?

Curiously, I was explaining all this to a group of sceptical friends one evening when one of them wryly asked, "Okay, so let me turn the question around: why, if oral tradition was so widely trusted, was the Jesus tradition written down so soon?" Everyone laughed, including me. Suddenly, the supposedly *long* time gap between Jesus and the Gospels was looking suspiciously *short*. No one had ever asked me that question before, and for a moment it threw me. Probably a simple reason the Jesus tradition started to be written down within just two decades of his death was the rapid expansion of the Christian church.

Written documents had one clear advantage over oral tradition: they could easily transmit information over long distances. Once a "retelling" of Christ's life was on paper, you could transport it, say, from Rome to Jerusalem or the other way around,

without having to send teachers or church members to rehearse the traditions for the new recipients. All you needed was a courier—which was how correspondence usually got around in the first century—and someone at the other end who could read aloud to the waiting congregation.

By about AD 50–60 Christianity was fast becoming a truly international movement with centres in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth and Rome. If churches in these far-flung places wanted to share their Jesus traditions with each other, there was no better way to do it than to write them down and send them off. Producing printed renditions of the Jesus tradition seemed sensible. It was certainly more efficient. This probably explains why between AD 50–90 the previously oral Jesus tradition began to be written down.¹⁰ Official collections of Jesus' sayings were compiled in Aramaic and Greek (for example, Q). The personal recollections of the apostle Peter were recorded (Mark's Gospel). Additional reports of Jesus' miracles were brought together (for example, SQ), as were some further accounts of his parables and dealings with sinners (L and possibly M). These were then assessed, edited and incorporated in different ways by different authors to produce the four Gospels of the New Testament. Once these were written, entire retellings of the life of Jesus could be passed on to distant communities easily and speedily. We learn from Eusebius (AD 260–340), the bishop of Caesarea, that second-century evangelists used the Gospels for just this purpose—to instruct people quickly across distant lands.

Starting on their journey, they took up the work of evangelists and were zealous to preach to all who had not yet heard the word of the faith, and to transmit the writing of the divine Gospels. As soon as they had no more than laid the foundations of the faith in some strange place, they appointed others as shepherds and committed to them the task of tending those who had been just brought in, but they themselves passed on again to other lands and peoples (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.37.2).

In short, the Gospels were written down so soon because Christianity spread so rapidly.