

Gospel reliability – is it an issue anyway?

It was another of those rather futile discussions . . .

A friend, visiting from America. A scientist, not a Christian, and someone who takes a somewhat skeptical, perhaps even cynical view. He started listing all the reasons why he felt the gospel accounts were inaccurate, and quickly I was drawn into response.

It was going nowhere of course. It's a vast subject, with many different nuances and facets. People have spend whole lifetimes studying it and only scratched the surface. There are no simple answers. Obviously 20 minutes round the swimming pool was not going to resolve anything, except perhaps to further harden attitudes.

Then, the next day I found myself looking back on the discussion and thinking, *Just a minute, does it really matter very much anyway? Just how central are these documents? If they're not accurate – if they'd never been written at all, even – how much difference would it really make? Would it really change anything?*

Let's examine this thing. We'll start by getting a perspective on the approximate timeline for the first 50 years' development of the New Testament Church. Then we can superimpose the writing of the gospel documents on which people seem to commonly assume the whole thing depends, and see how they fit together.

The Early Church, by decade, starting from the year:

30+ Jesus executed. Beginning of Christianity in Jerusalem within the next few months. Early spread to local centres such as Damascus, as well as to major international cities such as Rome and Antioch.

40+ Christian communities are now firmly embedded in the major imperial cities—Rome, Alexandria, Antioch. By the second half of the decade Paul is establishing congregations in present day Turkey.

50+ Paul's churches are now firmly rooted and growing. Additional non-Pauline churches such as Ephesus are flourishing. By 52 AD Paul is in Corinth, Greece, starting the church there, having recently started a further two congregations in northern Greece.

60+ There are now multiple congregations in present-day Italy—Paul encounters one such in Puteoli, near Naples, on his arrival in Italy in 62 AD. By now the Christian presence in Rome is substantial and well-known. Even the Emperor Nero knows about it—enough to be able to credibly blame Christians for the great fire of 64, and to mount the first major persecution in order to divert suspicion away from the true culprit (almost certainly himself).

70+ The Roman general Vespasian sacks Jerusalem, and Jewish Christianity goes into long-term decline; but by this time Christianity is so widely established across the Empire that even this momentous event causes it scarcely a blink. Fifty years on from its faltering beginnings, the momentum is now unstoppable.

This is the story of a self-confident and capable community that has gone through a progressive expansion over 50 years with scarcely a blip, an expansion that is to continue on unchecked for centuries.

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Now let's superimpose on this a timeline for the writing of (primarily) the gospels:

30+ No Christian documents are known from this decade.

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50+ Paul is writing letters from 52 AD onwards, continuing until around 62 AD. Probably still no gospels, though written collections of stories, including the hypothetical proto-gospel referred to as "Q" probably circulated.

60+ The earliest gospel, Mark, probably written in this decade, though some would argue as early as 55 AD. References to "the scriptures" in the epistles of this period still refer exclusively to the Old Testament.

70+ Matthew and Luke are generally dated to around this time.

80+ The last gospel, John, may have been written in this decade, though many experts date it even later.

What's the point of all this?

The point is, that if we superimpose these two timelines, we see that the most exciting and dramatic phase of expansion of the early church took place in an era in which none of the New Testament documents existed at all! For the first 20 years all they had was the message, spread by word of mouth, and the Old Testament. After this they started to get copies of Paul's letters, probably. Later still—probably 40 years on from the beginning—widespread access to the stories of Jesus' life that we now take so much for granted was finally starting to come about. Before that, people may have spread a few garbled stories of Jesus' life and teachings by word of mouth, but for these early Christians knowledge of the actual historical Jesus was rudimentary in the extreme, even in comparison to our own. **You can't argue that Christianity stands or falls on the reliability of the four gospel accounts. It simply doesn't!**

So where does this take us on the gospels?

Why were they written?

Not to convert people to Christianity, certainly. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us little if anything of the central Christian message. They tell us a great deal about **how** he died, in almost ghoulish detail; but almost nothing about **why** he died. John has a little bit more, but not much. If you want to read the gospel message you go to the epistles, Paul and the others.

No, the gospels were written for people who were already Christians. They already knew **why** Jesus had died. Now they're thinking, *If I've accepted this guy as Saviour, perhaps it would be a good next step to find out a bit about what he was like, how he lived, what he talked about, what his values were.* And that's the gospels. Not primary, central sources for conveying the Christian message, but rather secondary sources, there to flesh it out a bit for people who've already been converted.

So how important is their historical accuracy?

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Surprisingly, not very important at all. Or not surprisingly. Because they are not our primary source for the message.

If you could demonstrate that the letters of Paul as we have them now were in any way substantially different from what Paul originally wrote down, then Christianity would be in deep trouble. Because those letters (along with Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John and others) are our primary source for the message. If the message is garbled then we've really got a problem. But no one is seriously suggesting that this is the case. There may be questions over the authorship of some of the later ones, but that's not too important. They were written and circulated in the early church, and they reflect the beliefs that were held within that community. That's what matters. And other than that, there's almost universal agreement that the letters we have are, in essence, the letters as written.

Would it matter if they'd never been written?

Not hugely. It would be inconvenient, but not an insuperable difficulty. The New Testament letters give us the central Christian message, the proclamation, and as well as that they give us the moral code, how we are supposed to live. Without the gospels we'd be a bit more in the dark about the character of Jesus and the events of his life, and we'd have to use a bit more imagination than we already do, but we could get by.

So why do I still get drawn into the rather futile arguments?

Good question. Habit? Conditioning? From earliest childhood I've been brought up with the idea that these gospel narratives are the very core of the Christian message. It takes a bit of a radical jump to go against all that and wake up one day and think, *Now just a minute . . . !*

So, I have to give thanks to my anonymous visitor whose slightly aggressive questioning triggered my mind to an insight that, had I been a bit more alert, I might have spotted decades ago!