

Are the Gospels Eyewitness Accounts? Are the Gospels Eyewitness Accounts?

My thanks are due to Larry A. Taylor, who brought to my attention many of the points in this article. I rely very heavily on his work. Naturally, any mistakes made in this article are mine and mine alone.

Many Christians say the the Gospels are based on eyewitness testimony. Of course, they realise that Mark and Luke were not disciples, but they claim that these were written by people who were very close to the disciples and apostles.

Are these claims reasonable?

A Brief Background

There are four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the 'Synoptic' Gospels. This is because many episodes in them are similar enough that all three Gospels can be put together in one book, or 'synopsis', and textual differences compared.

As a result of these textual comparisons, it was noticed that Matthew and Luke seemed to be written after Mark and to use Mark as a written source. Of the 661 verses in Marks' Gospel, Matthew's Gospel uses about 607 and Luke's Gospel uses about 360. There are also about 230 verses which are very similar in Matthew and Luke, but which are not in Mark. Many Biblical scholars argue that , for these verses, Matthew and Luke must have used another written source, which is usually called "Q". The existence of Q is disputed, however it is almost universally agreed that Matthew and Luke knew of, and used, Mark.

Whatever the exact sequence, it is very clear that the similarity of Matthew, Mark and Luke means that some Gospels were used as sources for other Gospels.

But were they eyewitnesses?

This raises some interesting questions. Why would an eyewitness like Matthew need to use ninety percent of somebody else's book? Why would Luke, a companion of Paul, need to use a written source like Mark? If Luke knew Paul and Paul knew Peter, and Peter told Paul many stories about Jesus, then Luke could have written about Jesus from what he himself had heard, rather than relying on second or third-hand information.

Even if it seems that Matthew and Luke were relying on written third or fourth hand testimony, all is not lost if Christians can show that Mark was based on eye-witness testimony. Then the Gospels would be based on eyewitness reports. Perhaps they had gone through one or two people before Matthew and Luke retold the stories, but there would still be a connection between the disciples and the Gospel writers.

Was Mark's Gospel based on an eyewitness?

This has always been the traditional Christian view. Eusebius, writing in the 4th century, quotes Papias, writing in the 2nd century as saying "Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered of what was said or done by the Lord, however not in order." So it seems that the evidence that Mark's Gospel was based on Peter's witness is a quote centuries later, of a lost work, by someone who gives no arguments or explanation as to why we should assume that he was correct.

But was he correct? Was the author of Mark's Gospel a companion of Peter and therefore either an Aramaic-speaking Jew from Palestine, or at least someone who had a good knowledge of Aramaic and Judaism and Palestine?

Mark was not by Mark!

To determine that, it is necessary to look very closely at how Luke and especially Matthew used Mark's Gospel. Time and time again, we see Matthew correcting Mark's blunders about Judaism. Clearly Matthew was a Jew and Mark, despite Papias' bold assertion, was not very close to the Jerusalem Church.

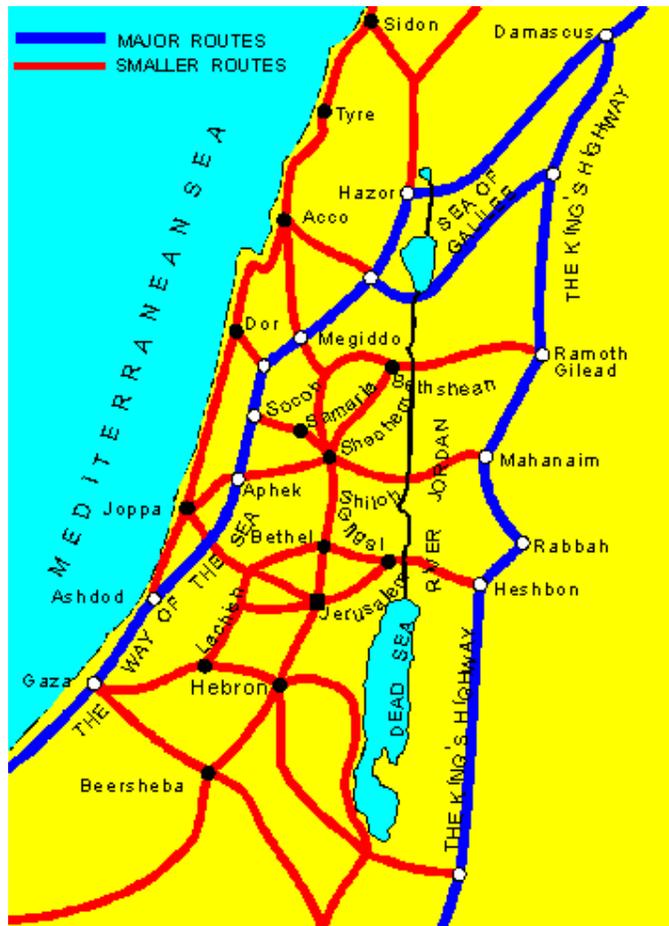
- Comparing Matthew 15:4 with Mark 7:10, Mark represents a more Gentile attitude in quoting the Old Testament as "Moses said" rather than "God said." Matthew, a Jew, would never have attributed the 10 commandments to Moses. It was God who said them, as all Jews will tell you. Naturally, there are many places in the first five books of the Bible which have 'And God said', but which are referred to by Jews as the Books of Moses, but the Ten Commandments are a different case from the rest of the Pentateuch and attributed directly to God.
- Mark 5:22: "One of the rulers of the synagogue." Diaspora synagogues may sometimes have had more than ruler, as at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:15), but Palestinian synagogues normally had only one. Matthew 9:18, drops this phrase.
- Mark 14:12: On the first day of unleavened bread **when they sacrificed the Passover**, confuses Nisan 15 with Nisan 14. Naturally, Matthew 26:17 drops the phrase "when they sacrificed the Passover". Was Mark a Jew who did not know about the Passover?
- Mark 14:13 says that the disciples were to be met by a man carrying a pitcher of water. Matthew 26:18 drops the idea that a Jewish man would do a woman's work.
- Mark 15:42, "When evening was already come, because it was Friday (paraskeue) that is, the day before the sabbath ..." . This means "either that Friday began with that sunset, and Jesus had died on Thursday; or else, the evangelist forgot [or did not know] that the Jewish day began at evening." Matthew 27:57-62 clarifies Mark's confusion over Jewish days. Interestingly, the NIV tries to translate the problem away by writing for Mark 15:42 'So as evening **approached**', rather than "And when evening had **come**", as the RSV has it.
- Mark 15:46 says that **that same evening** Joseph of Arimathea "bought a linen cloth." Matthew drops the idea of a Jew buying something on the Sabbath. No Jew could have made that mistake.
- Mark 1:2 wrongly ascribes Malachi 3:1 to Isaiah. Matthew 3:3 corrects this
- In Mark 2:7 the teachers of the law complain that Jesus is forgiving sins and say 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?'. Jews did not think that. Matthew 9:3 drops the phrase. There is a Dead Sea Scroll called 'The Prayer of Nabonidus'(4Q242), written and copied by Jews, where it is said by Nabonidus '... an exorcist pardoned my sins. He was a Jew...'.

Jews did believe that God could give authority to men to forgive sin.

- Mark 2:26 - Abiathar should be Ahimelech. Matthew 12:1-8 does not repeat the mistake. Incidentally, if Jesus was thinking of 1 Sam. 21:1-8 when he said that David and those who were with him were hungry, then, in his omniscience, he forgot that David was on the run alone and the story that David told Ahimelech was a falsehood - David was not on a mission from the king and he did not have an appointment with any young men.
- Mark 10:19 misquotes the Ten Commandments and inserts an extra commandment: "Do not defraud." Matthew 19:18-20 sticks to the original 10, plus the one that many Rabbis regarded as a summary of the commandments.
- Mark 15:34 has Jesus quoting Psalm 22:1 in Aramaic (Eloi). Had Jesus done this, bystanders could hardly have supposed that he was calling for Elijah. Jesus must have used Hebrew Eli, as at Matthew 27:46. The NIV tries to harmonize Matthew and Mark here by using Eloi in both places.

More dubious statements by a "Companion of Peter"

- Mark 7:31 says that Jesus and his disciples journeyed "out from the borders of Tyre ... through Sidon, to the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the borders". The journey described is like "travelling from Cornwall to London by way of Manchester" (Anderson, H. _The Gospel of Mark_, NCB (London, 1976).



Here is a map of the trade routes.

As can be seen, to get to the Decapolis, which was on the south and east side of the Sea of Galilee, it is best to go south from Tyre, rather than go north to Sidon, and then south. That would have taken Jesus on a route which goes to the north and west of Galilee (The Decapolis was south and east of Galilee)

- Mark 8:10 refers to the "the district of Dalmanutha." As far as is known, there was no such place in Galilee. (The difficulty was recognized early because there are many textual variants in the manuscripts.)
- Mark 5:1 specifies that the eastern side of the lake of Galilee is the country of the **Gerasenes**. This is more than 30 miles from a lake. This caused a lot of confusion as can be seen by the variety of names in the texts here. Matthew changed Mark's Gerasenes to Gadarenes in Matthew 8:28. Gadara was a well-known spa only eight miles from the lake.
- Mark 6:14-27 repeatedly refers to Herod Antipas as a "king." Matthew commits this error only once (14:9). The correct title 'tetrarch' appears in Matthew 14:1, Luke 3:19, Luke 9:7, Acts 13:1, but not once in Mark's Gospel
- Mark 6:17 says that Antipas married the wife of his brother Philip. According to Josephus, Antiquities. 18.5.4, she was actually the wife of a different brother.

Places where Matthew adds Jewish elements which 'Mark' overlooked

- Mark 13:17-19 fails to urge Jesus' followers to pray that they do not have to flee on the sabbath (compare Matthew. 24:20).
- Mark 2:23-28 lacks the appeal to the Mosaic Law found in Matthew 12:5.

- Mark 7:19b, a comment by the evangelist, asserts that Jesus "declared all foods clean." Matthew 15:20 drops this. It is inconceivable that Jesus would have abolished the food laws without his opponents ever once mentioning that in accusations.
- Mark 9:4 names Elijah before Moses. Naturally, Matthew 17:3 puts Moses before Elijah, as Moses is far more important to Jews than Elijah.
- Mark 11:10 refers to the kingdom our **father** David. No Jew would have referred to our father David. The father of the nation was Abraham, or possibly Jacob, who was renamed Israel. Not all Jews were sons of David. Naturally, Matthew 21:9 does not refer to our father David.
- Mark 12:31,33,34 subordinate the Torah to love, and to the kingdom, in contrast to Matt. 22:36-40, who as a Jew, put a far greater emphasis on the Law.

Mark has to explain Jewish features.

Mark never explains Gentile matters, such as who Pilate was. However, he assumes that his intended readers know even less about Judaism than he does and he has to explain the most elementary features. By contrast, Matthew makes more use of Judaism and assumes his readers are up to speed. Was Mark really a Jewish companion of Peter, or someone who was very close to the earliest, Jewish, followers of Jesus?

- Only Mark 12:42 explains that a lepton, a coin used in Palestine, was worth half a quadrans. Further more, "quadrans" is a word borrowed from Latin.
- Mark 10:12 forbids women to divorce their husbands and remarry. But Jewish law already forbade that! The teaching would have seemed outlandish to a Jew of Palestine, but was an appropriate expansion for those of pagan background.
- At Mark 3:17 and Mark 10:46, he has to explain the most elementary meanings of Aramaic surnames. This is supposedly from somebody to whom Aramaic was a mother tongue. Even if Mark is just explaining things to his readers, it is clear that his readers, being ignorant of elementary Aramaic and even the currency of Palestine, would have been in no position to check out any of the things that he wrote.
- Mark 6:48 uses 'the fourth watch'. The Jews divided the night into three watches. The Romans divided the night into four watches, according to the conservative 'New Bible Dictionary'. This is still more evidence that Mark's Gospel was written for people who would have been familiar with Roman and not Jewish customs, and so would have found it hard to check the Gospel stories.

Mark as a companion and friend of Peter.

Mark never acknowledges Peter's authority. Contrast Matthew 16:17-20, Luke 22:28-32, John 21:15-17.

There is nothing in Mark which a well educated Roman Gentile would not have known. For example, when Mark 15:38 talks about the curtain of the Temple, Roman Gentiles would have known that the Temple had a curtain, as it was taken to Rome after Jerusalem was sacked (Book 7, Chapter 5 in 'Wars of the Jews' by Josephus).

Contradictions and problems in Mark's stories

Mark 4:11 says that the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to the disciples. What was this secret? When was it given to the disciples, who seem totally ignorant of who Jesus was (Mark 4:41)?

In Mark 6:7-13 till 29-30 the disciples are sent out to preach and teach.

As the disciples did not know Jesus was the Messiah until Mark 8:30, that must have been interesting!

Peter - Repent of your sins, and follow Jesus of Nazareth.

Bystander in the crowd - Is he the Messiah who will rid us of the cursed Roman occupation?

Peter - I never thought to ask him. I don't know. I'll ask him when I see him again, and get back to you.

What could the disciples have preached and taught in Mark 6 that had anything to do with the secret of the kingdom of God? Why send people out to teach without explaining that you are the Messiah?

They were also given power over evil spirits, but it is not until Mark 9:29 that Jesus explains that they have to pray first before driving out a demon. How did the disciples drive out demons before that, when Jesus had neglected to give them such basic instruction as to pray first?

Mark 7:14 gives some instruction about the Law which a simpleton could grasp, yet Jesus tells the disciples in verse 18 that they are without understanding. These are the preacher-teachers who had been given the secret of the kingdom of God.

Despite not being able to understand, and not knowing, elementary instruction about the Law, they had already by chapter 3 had liberal practices on fasting and the Sabbath, and the whole teaching of chapter 7 (which the disciples did not understand) was caused by a question about the practices of those same disciples!

Don't forget that these preacher-teachers, who had been given the secret of the Kingdom of God in 4:11, had had their hearts hardened in 6:52, so that they did not understand even such a blatant miracle as walking on water.

Why give the disciples the secret of the kingdom of God and then harden their hearts so that they don't understand it?

Surely the average Christian would fall about laughing if he read such stories in the Book of Mormon or the Qu'ran.

A response - 30th January 1999

Steven,

The amount of work you've put in is terrifying!

I have only read your first Biblical evidence essay and feel compelled to put across an alternative thesis. This cannot be an original idea although in my (very) limited reading I have yet to come across it clearly stated.

I come from the opposite corner but like many people have been an atheist in the past. Ironically I turned theistic and then Catholic while studying for a physics degree. This means my particular bugbear is people claiming science and Christianity (as opposed to scientists and Christians) are in conflict.

To be clear, the Gospels were written by humans and not God. Not even 'inspired' humans. They are also quite capable of being in error and I have no intention of trying to justify the bits that don't fit.

You show convincingly that Mark was not a Jew. If he wrote after Peter died based on what he was told we would expect Mark to be writing in Rome. Therefore we should hardly be surprised the work appears to be addressed to educated Romans. They would have spoken Greek as well as Latin and indeed Greek was the lingua franca of half the empire.

I have no idea who Mark was. The idea put forward that he is the naked man who ran off has always struck me as unfounded. Paul mentions a Mark but it is hardly an unusual name in the Roman Empire. I do not see why he must have been an Aramaic speaking Jew to be Peter's companion. It is entirely

possible that Peter (who has a letter or two to his name) spoke Greek in his later years but needed a Latin interpreter. There is no reason to believe Mark had ever been anywhere near Palestine.

Peter had just been crucified, probably by Nero. Under those circumstances Mark is hardly going to suggest Peter was indispensable. Peter didn't rise from the dead so suggesting he was appointed by Jesus in a successor role (like Matthew seems to) would be a daft thing to do.

Finally to Papias via Eusebius. It is probably a reactionary thing to do but why not take him at face value? Papias states Mark is in the wrong order. You clearly agree with this. There is also the point that it seems to have bits missing (there is even a pseudo historical 'Secret Gospel' around claiming to fill these bits in). The entire end has dropped off to be replaced at a much later date. It is clearly a very rough work thrown together under very trying circumstances.

What does Papias say about Matthew? Well, that he wrote down Jesus's saying in Hebrew/Aramaic (I forget which) before Mark wrote his Gospel. Let us assume that this character - proto Matthew - was the apostle and that he wrote down what he remembered Jesus saying. The precedent for this is, of course, the Gospel of Thomas discovered at Nag Hammadi which is also only a collection of sayings.

The evangelist 'Matthew', an educated Greek speaking Jew, comes along many years later (probably c100AD). He has a copy of Mark (in Greek), the sayings and some oral tradition. He edits and corrects Mark, inserts the nativity stories he has heard, adds the sayings mainly as a coherent sermon on the mount and produces a rather more polished product. Following the usual practice of the time, he credits the work to his illustrious predecessor, the apostle.

I am sorry my account here is less than polished but I felt compelled to reply to your finely argued piece. I look forward to seeing what damage you have done to John. I was always rather fond of John...

Best wishes, James

Are the Gospels Eyewitness Accounts? Examines the Gospels of Matthew and Mark

In a different article I showed that Mark was not written by somebody close to the Jerusalem apostles and that Matthew, who used Mark heavily, could not have been an eyewitness, or he would have chosen a better source.

In this article I look more closely at Luke's and John's Gospels.

Luke's Gospel

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If Luke was written after Mark and as even the earliest Christians acknowledged that Mark was written after Peter's death, then Luke would have had trouble interviewing eyewitnesses. Besides, Luke knew very little Aramaic and shows little knowledge of Judaea.

Luke 3:27 says that Rhesa was the son of Zerubabel. But Rhesa is an Aramaic word meaning 'Prince' and was Zerubabel's title, not the name of his son. In Acts 4:36, Barnabas does not mean 'Son of Encouragement', but 'Son of Nebo' or 'Son of a prophet'. To quote Hanson in 'Acts' (Oxford University Press 1967, p 81), 'it is unlikely that anybody who knew Aramaic could have made this mistake'. Barnabas appears in a list in Acts 13:1, together with Manaen (Menahem), whose name is much closer to 'Son of Encouragement'. Presumably Luke misread his list. He certainly never asked Barnabas what his name meant.

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AD 44. According to Josephus, in Antiquities 19.9.2, Claudius ordered the soldiers of Caesarea to be removed when Fadus became procurator and to be replaced by soldiers from Roman legions, so they could hardly have been crack Roman troops.

Acts 23:23-31 has the Roman garrison send more than half its troops (470 soldiers to escort one man) from Jerusalem to Antipatris, a trip of 45 miles which the foot soldiers do in one night! We won't enquire how Luke got the letter in Acts 23:26-30, nor how he got access to a private meeting of the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:35-40

While Luke has a superb knowledge of the Gentile world, he has little knowledge of Judaea and Aramaic.

His intended readers also had no knowledge of Judaea. Compare Luke's description of where Mount Olivet was (Acts 1:12) and his need to explain names like Tabitha or Akeldama and his description of 'a city of Galilee named Nazareth' and 'Capernaum a city of Galilee' with the casual reference to the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns, and Syracuse, Rhegium, Puteoli in Acts 28, with no explanation. These were all in the vicinity of Rome. Luke assumed that his readers were familiar with Roman geography.

Luke's readers in Rome would hardly have been able to check out events in Judaea to see if he had been accurate.

Acts 25:13 mentions Berenice without any explanation of who she was. Berenice only became famous after 69 AD when she had an affair with Titus, son of the Emperor Vespasian. This is all in Juvenal's Satires. We can assume that Acts must have been written after AD 69 for Luke to mention Agrippa and Berenice with no explanation of who they were.

As Luke wishes to portray Agrippa as being fairly sympathetic to Paul (Acts 25:32), he naturally takes care not to mention that Agrippa was having an incestuous relationship with his sister, Berenice. This is an example of how the Gospel writers selected what they wanted to tell their readers.

Paul and Peter

Acts gives many speeches by Peter. All of them show signs of being composed by Luke. Readers of ancient histories expected the authors to compose the speeches of the subjects. The better the speeches, the better the histories. There is nothing wrong with Luke composing Peter's speeches, unless you want to argue that Luke was simply reporting what Peter said. I regard it as an open question as to whether Luke ever met Peter.

Luke also seems to have based some of Acts on classical Greek literature, especially Euripides' Bacchae. In Acts 26:12, Luke says that Paul heard Jesus say, in Aramaic or Hebrew, 'It is hard for you to kick against the pricks'. 'Kick against the pricks' (laktizo pros kentron) was a well known **Greek** saying, which first seems to appear in line 790 of Euripides' Bacchae.

In Euripides' Bacchae, line 447, we read the following 'Of their own accord (autamato), the chains were loosed from their feet and keys opened the doors (thura) without human hand.' In Acts 10:12, we read how doors opened for Peter of their own accord (automatos) and in Acts 16:26, we read how an earthquake loosed the chains from everybody and all the doors opened by themselves.

Did an earthquake really loose a chain from a prisoner, not a noted result of seismic activity? Or did Luke base his account of Peter and Paul's escapes on Euripides' play about the persecuted followers of a persecuted and misunderstood deity, the son of Zeus and a young , mortal woman?

Links to Euripides' play can be found [Euripides Bacchae 795](#) and [Euripides Bacchae 441](#)

Just out of curiosity, Euripides play 'Alcestis' is about a person who dies voluntarily in the place of another and then conquers death by being raised from the dead by a god. This is speculative, but perhaps 'Alcestis' is what first drew Euripides to Luke's attention.

Less speculative is the admission by F.F.Bruce in his book 'The New Testament documents - Are they reliable?' that Acts 14:12 'ho hegoumenon tou logou' comes from 'The Egyptian Mysteries' of Iamblichus, where Hermes is described as 'the god who is the leader of the speeches' (theos ho ton legon hegemon). Clearly, Luke was well acquainted with Greek classical literature.

John's Gospel

It was assumed by the early Christians that John's Gospel was written by John, simply because no disciple is called John in the Gospel.

One thing is clear. John's Gospel clashes head-on with the other three Gospels. The events in Mark seem to take place over a two or three month period. John puts 3 Passovers in the ministry of Jesus. In John's Gospel, there are no exorcisms. There is not a single parable, although the other Gospels have this as one of the main ways Jesus taught. There is no Lord's Prayer in John. There is no Sermon on the Mount. The main commandments of the other Gospels is to love your neighbour and to love your enemies. John's Gospel does not think that worth recording. He gives the main commandment of Jesus that Christians should love one another. This is something that the Jesus of Matthew 5:46 says that even tax-collectors and pagans do.

There is no agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, no Virgin Birth in Bethlehem, no temptation by Satan, no Transfiguration, no proclamation that the kingdom of God is coming, no stay in the wilderness. How could anybody leave out such important stories if they were circulating freely among Christians?

In Mark 8:11, Jesus refuses to ever give a sign. In John 2:11, 2:23, 3:2 , 4:48, 4:54, 6:2, 6:14, 7:31, 9:16, 11:47, 12:8, 12:37, 20:30 there are many signs. John does not record anything about the blood of the new covenant at the Last Supper.

These are all things that you would imagine a disciple of Jesus would have commented on.

In the other Gospels Jesus never states directly who he is. In John, this seems to be all he talks about. In John, Jesus only mentions the Kingdom of God once (John 3:3-5), in sharp contrast to the Jesus of the other three Gospels. Mark and Matthew has Jesus teach the disciples a great deal in private. In John, Jesus's teaching is entirely in public. Jesus speaks in long narratives, just like the voice of the narrator in John.

John has a very different account of how the disciples were called than the other Gospels have. In John, 2 disciples of John the Baptist follow Jesus , when they hear John speak of Jesus. This took place in Bethany, not Capernaum as in Mark. Philip brings Nathanael who is not listed in the Synoptics.

John has Nathanael say to Jesus 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God'. In Mark, the disciples are quite unaware of who Jesus is - only supernatural beings know. Matthew makes sure that only Judas Iscariot ever calls Jesus 'Rabbi'.

The text of John shows clear signs of being edited. Almost everybody accepts that it originally ended at Chapter 20:31 and that Chapter 21 was added later. It is possible that John 1:1-18 were also added later as they use many terms not in the main text, but this is disputed.

In chapter 2, Jesus performs his first sign, and then in verse 23, it is stated that Jesus did more signs, and then in 4:54, he does his second sign.

In John 2:23, Jesus is in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. He talks to Nicodemus and then goes, in John 3:12, into the land of Judea. Notice that the NIV tries to get around this by translating 'ge' (land) as countryside, so that Jesus goes into the countryside of Judea. This is the only time that the NIV translates 'ge' as 'countryside', and 'countryside' (chora) is translated correctly everywhere else in the NIV. The translation is done just to avoid a contradiction.

Jesus is in Jerusalem for all of chapter 5. Then in 6:1, he goes to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. How could he go to the other side, if he is not already at one side, but is in fact three days journey away.

Peter asks Jesus 'Lord, where are you going?' (John 13:36). Thomas says 'Lord, we do not know where you are going' (John 14:5). Very soon after, Jesus says to the disciples 'None of you ask me - Where are you going?' (John 16:5). It seems that chapters 15, 16 and 17 have been spliced on to an original story.

In John, Jesus seems to have been one of the dullest speakers ever. In John 14:31, Jesus says 'Rise, let us go hence', but takes another 3 chapters to do so, until John 18:1.

John 16:5 contradicts John 14:5. John 12:44-50 is out of any context as Jesus has just gone into hiding (12:36). John 3:31-36 is another passage that does not seem to have any context. Is it the narrator speaking, or John the Baptist, or Jesus?

In John 5:26-30, he virtually repeats what he said in John 5:19-25. John 6:51-58 is very repetitive of what Jesus has just said in 6:35-50.

Conclusion

John's Gospel contradicts the others and seems to have been heavily edited and reworked. The portrait of Jesus is so different from the others that I do not see how it can be claimed, as it often is, that the Gospels present a consistent and coherent characterisation of Jesus.

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Acts 10:1 says that there were Roman troops (the Italian Cohort) at Caesarea a little before 44 AD, which was when Agrippa died (Acts 12). The first mention of the Italian Cohort is in AD 69 and there was no Roman Procurator of Judaea between Marullus in AD 41 and Cuspius Fadus in

AD 44. According to Josephus, in Antiquities 19.9.2, Claudius ordered the soldiers of Caesarea to be removed when Fadus became procurator and to be replaced by soldiers from Roman legions, so they could hardly have been crack Roman troops.

Acts 23:23-31 has the Roman garrison send more than half its troops (470 soldiers to escort one man) from Jerusalem to Antipatris, a trip of 45 miles which the foot soldiers do in one night! We won't enquire how Luke got the letter in Acts 23:26-30, nor how he got access to a private meeting of the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:35-40

While Luke has a superb knowledge of the Gentile world, he has little knowledge of Judaea and Aramaic.

His intended readers also had no knowledge of Judaea. Compare Luke's description of where Mount Olivet was (Acts 1:12) and his need to explain names like Tabitha or Akeldama and his description of 'a city of Galilee named Nazareth' and 'Capernaum a city of Galilee' with the casual reference to the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns, and Syracuse, Rhegium, Puteoli in Acts 28, with no explanation. These were all in the vicinity of Rome. Luke assumed that his readers were familiar with Roman geography.

Luke's readers in Rome would hardly have been able to check out events in Judaea to see if he had been accurate.

Acts 25:13 mentions Berenice without any explanation of who she was. Berenice only became famous after 69 AD when she had an affair with Titus, son of the Emperor Vespasian. This is all in Juvenal's Satires. We can assume that Acts must have been written after AD 69 for Luke to mention Agrippa and Berenice with no explanation of who they were.

As Luke wishes to portray Agrippa as being fairly sympathetic to Paul (Acts 25:32), he naturally takes care not to mention that Agrippa was having an incestuous relationship with his sister, Berenice. This is an example of how the Gospel writers selected what they wanted to tell their readers.

Paul and Peter

Acts gives many speeches by Peter. All of them show signs of being composed by Luke. Readers of ancient histories expected the authors to compose the speeches of the subjects. The better the speeches, the better the histories. There is nothing wrong with Luke composing Peter's speeches, unless you want to argue that Luke was simply reporting what Peter said. I regard it as an open question as to whether Luke ever met Peter.

Luke also seems to have based some of Acts on classical Greek literature, especially Euripides' Bacchae. In Acts 26:12, Luke says that Paul heard Jesus say, in Aramaic or Hebrew, 'It is hard for you to kick against the pricks'. 'Kick against the pricks' (laktizo pros kentron) was a well known **Greek** saying, which first seems to appear in line 790 of Euripides' Bacchae.

In Euripides' Bacchae, line 447, we read the following 'Of their own accord (autamato), the chains were loosed from their feet and keys opened the doors (thura) without human hand.' In Acts 10:12, we read how doors opened for Peter of their own accord (automatos) and in Acts 16:26, we read how an earthquake loosed the chains from everybody and all the doors opened by themselves.

Did an earthquake really loose a chain from a prisoner, not a noted result of seismic activity? Or did Luke base his account of Peter and Paul's escapes on Euripides' play about the persecuted followers of a persecuted and misunderstood deity, the son of Zeus and a young , mortal woman?

Links to Euripides' play can be found [Euripides Bacchae 795](#) and [Euripides Bacchae 441](#)

Just out of curiosity, Euripides play 'Alcestis' is about a person who dies voluntarily in the place of another and then conquers death by being raised from the dead by a god. This is speculative, but perhaps 'Alcestis' is what first drew Euripides to Luke's attention.

Less speculative is the admission by F.F.Bruce in his book 'The New Testament documents - Are they reliable?' that Acts 14:12 'ho hegoumenon tou logou' comes from 'The Egyptian Mysteries' of Iamblichus, where Hermes is described as 'the god who is the leader of the speeches' (theos ho ton legon hegemon). Clearly, Luke was well acquainted with Greek classical literature.

John's Gospel

It was assumed by the early Christians that John's Gospel was written by John, simply because no disciple is called John in the Gospel.

One thing is clear. John's Gospel clashes head-on with the other three Gospels. The events in Mark seem to take place over a two or three month period. John puts 3 Passovers in the ministry of Jesus. In John's Gospel, there are no exorcisms. There is not a single parable, although the other Gospels have this as one of the main ways Jesus taught. There is no Lord's Prayer in John. There is no Sermon on the Mount. The main commandments of the other Gospels is to love your neighbour and to love your enemies. John's Gospel does not think that worth recording. He gives the main commandment of Jesus that Christians should love one another. This is something that the Jesus of Matthew 5:46 says that even tax-collectors and pagans do.

There is no agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, no Virgin Birth in Bethlehem, no temptation by Satan, no Transfiguration, no proclamation that the kingdom of God is coming, no stay in the wilderness. How could anybody leave out such important stories if they were circulating freely among Christians?

In Mark 8:11, Jesus refuses to ever give a sign. In John 2:11, 2:23, 3:2 , 4:48, 4:54, 6:2, 6:14, 7:31, 9:16, 11:47, 12:8, 12:37, 20:30 there are many signs. John does not record anything about the blood of the new covenant at the Last Supper.

These are all things that you would imagine a disciple of Jesus would have commented on.

In the other Gospels Jesus never states directly who he is. In John, this seems to be all he talks about. In John, Jesus only mentions the Kingdom of God once (John 3:3-5), in sharp contrast to the Jesus of the other three Gospels. Mark and Matthew has Jesus teach the disciples a great deal in private. In John, Jesus's teaching is entirely in public. Jesus speaks in long narratives, just like the voice of the narrator in John.

John has a very different account of how the disciples were called than the other Gospels have. In John, 2 disciples of John the Baptist follow Jesus , when they hear John speak of Jesus. This took place in Bethany, not Capernaum as in Mark. Philip brings Nathanael who is not listed in the Synoptics.

John has Nathanael say to Jesus 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God'. In Mark, the disciples are quite unaware of who Jesus is - only supernatural beings know. Matthew makes sure that only Judas Iscariot ever calls Jesus 'Rabbi'.

The text of John shows clear signs of being edited. Almost everybody accepts that it originally ended at Chapter 20:31 and that Chapter 21 was added later. It is possible that John 1:1-18 were also added later as they use many terms not in the main text, but this is disputed.

In chapter 2, Jesus performs his first sign, and then in verse 23, it is stated that Jesus did more signs, and then in 4:54, he does his second sign.

In John 2:23, Jesus is in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. He talks to Nicodemus and then goes, in John 3:12, into the land of Judea. Notice that the NIV tries to get around this by translating 'ge' (land) as countryside, so that Jesus goes into the countryside of Judea. This is the only time that the NIV translates 'ge' as 'countryside', and 'countryside' (chora) is translated correctly everywhere else in the NIV. The translation is done just to avoid a contradiction.

Jesus is in Jerusalem for all of chapter 5. Then in 6:1, he goes to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. How could he go to the other side, if he is not already at one side, but is in fact three days journey away.

Peter asks Jesus 'Lord, where are you going?' (John 13:36). Thomas says 'Lord, we do not know where you are going' (John 14:5). Very soon after, Jesus says to the disciples 'None of you ask me - Where are you going?' (John 16:5). It seems that chapters 15, 16 and 17 have been spliced on to an original story.

In John, Jesus seems to have been one of the dullest speakers ever. In John 14:31, Jesus says 'Rise, let us go hence', but takes another 3 chapters to do so, until John 18:1.

John 16:5 contradicts John 14:5. John 12:44-50 is out of any context as Jesus has just gone into hiding (12:36). John 3:31-36 is another passage that does not seem to have any context. Is it the narrator speaking, or John the Baptist, or Jesus?

In John 5:26-30, he virtually repeats what he said in John 5:19-25. John 6:51-58 is very repetitive of what Jesus has just said in 6:35-50.

Conclusion

John's Gospel contradicts the others and seems to have been heavily edited and reworked. The portrait of Jesus is so different from the others that I do not see how it can be claimed, as it often is, that the Gospels present a consistent and coherent characterisation of Jesus.

What did Paul know about Jesus?

The aim of this article is to show that there is no evidence that the stories which were later to appear in the four Gospels, were circulating widely while Paul was writing and preaching.

A secondary aim is to show that Paul knew next to nothing about the Gospel stories, as he fails to mention them at crucial points and often seems to contradict them.

Paul is often called the second greatest Christian who ever lived and the greatest evangelist who ever lived. He helped to spread the Gospel over a wide area. His letters are the earliest Christian documents we have.

Paul's letters are primary evidence. Primary evidence is very important to historians. For example, here is a coin from the time of Vespasian depicting the fall of Judea during the war between the



Jews and Rome.

Here is a coin from the time of Domitian. The letters 'Domitian' are clearly visible.



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