

## Can We Trust the Gospels?

In our study of the life and teaching of Jesus, we have taken it for granted that we can actually learn something about him from the gospels of the New Testament. We have suggested that, though the gospels share some of the characteristics of ancient biographies of Jesus, their ultimate purpose was not to give a comprehensive account of all that could be known of him, but rather to provide selective presentations of aspects of his words and actions that would assist Christians in addressing key concerns within their own communities, while at the same time providing resources that would equip them for their mission in the wider world. We have not taken that fact as a reason to question the general reliability of their accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, but have assumed that the traditional stories and sayings that were handed on to the evangelists, and from which they constructed their own narratives, can be trusted to provide an authentic picture of Jesus as he actually was, rather than regarding them as imaginative creations dreamed up by those who first wrote about Jesus.

It must be frankly admitted, however, that this assumption has been called into question from a number of different directions. We do not need to take seriously those writers who occasionally claim that Jesus never existed at all, for there is clear evidence to the contrary from a number of Jewish, Latin and Islamic sources. But when people who have studied the New Testament for a lifetime claim that the gospels reveal nothing of importance about Jesus, then we need to take serious account of their arguments. One of the most radical expressions of this viewpoint was associated with the name of Rudolf Bultmann, who in a book first published in 1934 made the remarkable statement: 'I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus.' Not even his own students were generally as negative as that, and indeed that statement itself has to be set against the fact that, in reality, Bultmann argued elsewhere that significant elements of teaching as found in the gospels were indeed original to Jesus himself. But in the mid-to late-twentieth century, whole generations of scholars adopted a generally sceptical attitude towards both the possibility and the value of knowledge about 'the historical Jesus', to such an extent that in some instances the gospels themselves were treated almost in an allegorical sort of way, as if they were really intended to be pictures of the life of early Christian communities, dressed up to look like accounts of the life of Jesus.

Our knowledge of Jesus is obviously going to be different from our knowledge of Paul, for he can be known through the letters that he wrote, and these can be compared and contrasted with the New Testament's narrative accounts of his doings in order to produce a coherent account of his life and thinking. Jesus, however, did not write a book, and he spent his brief life as a wandering teacher, working in a more or less remote corner of the Roman empire, among people who were probably not especially interested in literary matters. For that and related reasons, it is quite unlikely that Jesus' words and actions had ever been written down by those who actually heard him speak.

Furthermore we know that Jesus lived in a society whose common daffy language was probably Aramaic, while our knowledge of his teaching comes from documents written in Greek. Though Greek would certainly have been familiar to the people of Galilee, there is no compelling reason to suppose Jesus normally taught in that language, which means the gospels are, at best, a translation of the words of Jesus from Aramaic into Greek. One of the consequences of the transmission of Jesus' sayings in Greek is that there are now variant accounts of what is obviously the same basic tradition. The similarities between the synoptic gospels are so close that there can be no doubt they are variants on the same themes, though the differences are too striking to be explained merely as variant translations from Aramaic into Greek. These are the underlying considerations which have given birth to source, form and redaction criticism. No matter which explanation of gospel relationships is adopted, it is obvious that something has happened to the traditions of Jesus' teaching and deeds in the process of their being handed on from one group to another.

It is important not to exaggerate the potential problems raised by all this. For generations, gospel readers who had never heard of the synoptic problem have had little difficulty in dealing with such matters. For all the distinctiveness of the various stories about Jesus and the reports of his teaching, there is clearly an inner coherence in the gospels as a whole. It is not difficult to gather together an account of what the gospels collectively present as 'the teaching of Jesus', and the fundamental elements of that teaching are the same in all four gospels. However, that should not absolve us from giving some attention to the question.

## Oral culture and literary culture

Modern readers of the gospels are often surprised to learn that there is no conclusive evidence to show that any of the four New Testament gospels was written by a direct disciple of Jesus, and that two of them (Mark and Luke) certainly were not. That, combined with the fact that the earliest gospel was written something like thirty to forty years after Jesus' death, can seem a definite weakness to people living in an age of instant electronic communications. But today the spoken word is still the main method of communication for most of the world's people, while even in the West the continued relevance of oral history for a proper understanding of the past is being reasserted. All over the Western world, projects have been initiated to save in more permanent form the unwritten recollections of older people before their memories fail, and in cultures where this type of memorizing has been encouraged and promoted for generations it is amazing how comprehensive a power of recall an older person can have, even for events in the dim and distant past. Oral reminiscences can provide an exceedingly accurate way of recording history, and those whose history has been deliberately disrupted, by events such as the forcible enslavement of Africans in America or the Nazi Holocaust, have regularly been surprised at how easy it can be to piece together the story of their forebears on the basis of traditional stories handed on in their own families, sometimes (as in the case of African Americans) over centuries. By contrast, the oral period for the New Testament stories about Jesus covers something like fifty years at most, and some of it a lot less. For instance, Paul mentions some eyewitness evidence about the resurrection of Jesus (1 [Corinthians 15:1-5](#)). While he actually wrote this down in about A.D.55, he says he had known the information since he first became a Christian, which happened not more than a year or two after Jesus' death.

It is a well-established fact that the rabbis took great pains to ensure that their sayings were actually learned and passed on word for word by their followers. From time to time scholars have proposed that Jesus adopted the same methods, formulating his teaching with a view to his disciples learning it by heart, so that they could transmit it to their own followers in the same easily memorized form, and that the gospels therefore represent the writing down of accurately transmitted traditions going right back to Jesus himself. There is absolutely no evidence at all to support this suggestion: not only do the gospels themselves highlight how different Jesus was from other religious teachers ([Mark 1:22](#)), but there is nothing to suggest that the early Christians ever regarded themselves as the transmitters of tradition, rather than interpreters of the message of Jesus to the needs of their own people. At the same time, theories of this kind have drawn attention to the fact that Jesus' teaching did originate in a cultural context where the teaching of an authoritative leader was treated with great respect, and even if the earliest disciples did not learn Jesus' sayings by heart, they would certainly have had a high regard for them and would not readily have corrupted or altered them.

There is also ample evidence for the reliable oral preservation of stories in the wider Hellenistic world. The *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* has often been viewed as a possible literary model for the gospel genre. Apollonius was a contemporary of Jesus, though he lived on into old age and died towards the end of the first century. But the account of his life was not written down until the beginning of the third century. Its author collected the stories of his life from a number of different sources, and was certainly not an impartial and detached biographer, but there are no serious doubts about the reliability of the main outline of his account. Compared with this and other written accounts about persons and events in the Roman world, the New Testament gospels were compiled very close in time to the events they describe, and still within the lifetime of eyewitnesses.

## Presuppositions

Another relevant consideration relates to the attitudes that readers themselves bring to the gospels. What do we expect to find in them? History? Biography? Chronologically structured journals of Jesus' life? Word-for-word precision in reporting what he said? Or something else? Such terminology was alien to the evangelists themselves, who used quite different language to describe their books. The only thing they all consistently claim is that they were writing 'the good news'. But to describe anything as 'good' news is to make a value judgment on it—to commend it, and to imply that those who read it will be glad that they did. We have already given extensive consideration to the way in which the gospel writers have carefully selected the materials they include in order to fulfil this overall purpose. But this understanding is not merely concerned with the literary style and origin of the gospels: it also has repercussions for an appreciation of the nature of the 'truth' about Jesus as the evangelists present it.

In the light of the clearly stated purposes of [Luke 1:1–4](#) and [John 20:31](#) (implied in the other gospels), there can be no question that the gospel writers were biased. They all believed in Jesus. Through his teaching they had discovered new purpose for their own everyday existence, and they wanted to share that with other people. They were convinced that Jesus was not dead, but alive, and was now continuing to work through the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit in his people. The evangelists were certain that the absolute truth about life's meaning was to be found in Jesus—and if they had not been, they would never have bothered to write about him at all.

No doubt some readers will be thinking this proves what they have long suspected, for how can people so biased possibly present an objective picture? But the idea that only supposedly 'unbiased' people can ever tell the truth belongs to a way of understanding reality that no longer stands up to critical scrutiny. The philosophical notion developed through the European Enlightenment, that merely by the exercise of human reason it is possible to step outside our own experience of life and judge things in some kind of 'objective' way entirely detached from our own perspectives, is now seen to have been just wishful thinking on the part of self-opinionated white Westerners who wished to justify their own ideas over against what they regarded as the 'irrational' understandings of people of other times and places. We now know that even the outcome of scientific experiments can be affected by the presence or absence of the investigators in the laboratory, and a moment's thought about how we all receive information in everyday life is sufficient to question not only the existence, but also the value, of a truly 'unbiased' person.

To know anything at all about events we have not witnessed ourselves, we must depend on the accounts of those who did, and those accounts are invariably 'biased'. Moreover, in dealing with things like news reports, we actually expect people to explain to us the significance of what they report. This is what distinguishes news reports and 'proper history' from bare data. Mere records may contain 'facts', but in an abstract and incoherent way, and before they become even remotely interesting they need to be interpreted, and that means asking relevant questions, identifying possible opinions, and presenting some kind of considered value judgment, which will invariably be related to the personal perceptions of those who are processing the information.

In everyday life, all this is taken for granted, and most people generally place more value on the kind of impressionistic account of events given by those who have reflected on their possible significance than they do on mere reporting of 'brute facts'. Of course, that means that choices sometimes have to be made between different accounts of the same episodes. Lawyers and judges do this all the time, for the recollections of different individuals about what they have seen naturally differ. In describing a car crash, for example, there might be any number of detailed differences in the accounts provided by witnesses. We expect judges to reach a decision by taking account of them all. A judge would be unlikely to conclude that because a crash was described in different ways, it probably never happened, or even that the cars and the roads—the city where the alleged incident took place—did not exist. One who did would not keep the job for long, because these would be absurd conclusions. Yet this is exactly the sort of crazy logic that otherwise intelligent people seem

prepared to apply when talking about the New Testament. The four gospels are not identical, their writers were biased and they make value judgments about what they report—so the only safe conclusion must be that these things never happened, and maybe Jesus never existed!

## Intellectual imperialism

One of the reasons why such a line of argument can seem to make sense is that Western thinkers have often imagined that only people like them are capable of making rational assessments of such matters. Many modern theologians (though not as many historians) speak so disparagingly of the historians of the Roman world that it is easy to get the impression that the concept of accurate history writing was quite unknown to them. We need hardly be surprised at the emergence of this form of intellectual imperialism towards ancient authors, for it is just another version of the sort of ethnic arrogance that in recent centuries has motivated white Western people to regard themselves as superior to all the rest of the world's people. It is of course true that ancient historians did not have at their disposal all the aids that might be available today, but ancient people were just as conscious of the need for proper research as their modern counterparts. They used different tools and procedures to verify their information, but they did not make things up. Latin and Greek historians set themselves high standards for sifting and assessing their information, and developed their own sophisticated procedures for doing so. The principles outlined by authors like Lucian and Thucydides make it quite clear that they operated within guidelines that would not be out of place even today. Luke and John both indicate that they thought they were using the same procedures, and there is every reason to think the others did as well.

A good example of their literary sophistication can be found in the work of Luke, whose gospel was part of a two-volume work which also included the book of Acts, linking the story of Jesus to the story of his early disciples. One of the more striking features of the book of Acts is that it tells the story of Paul's dramatic conversion three times, in [9:3–19](#), [22:6–16](#), and [26:9–23](#). All three versions are different. Is this because Luke had no idea what actually happened, or because he was making it all up? If he had been doing that, he would have been more likely to create just one account rather than preserving three distinctive versions. As it is, the most obvious explanation is that Luke adapted the same story at different points in his narrative in order to present varied aspects of the meaning of what he was reporting. If one writer could do that within a single book, and see no inconsistency about it, there can be no grounds for complaint when different writers are found to have utilized the stories about Jesus in diverse ways, to suit the needs of their audience. The early church certainly had no problems with this, as they quite happily preserved all four of the canonical gospels alongside each other and not until the second century was there any attempt to create one single harmonized account from them.

If modern readers find this hard to accept, it is because they are imprisoned by their own presuppositions about how the gospels should have been written. The evangelists were not interested in preserving the words of Jesus merely as souvenirs from the past: they were not primarily annalists, but evangelists and pastors. For them, Jesus' teaching was a living message, with the power to bring new light into the lives of those who read and reflected on it. It was something to be used, not merely recorded. Even something as important as the Lord's prayer was used in different forms when Christians met for worship—and so Matthew's version ([Matthew 6:9–13](#)) was not quite identical with Luke's ([Luke 11:2–4](#)), and after both their gospels had been written, continued use changed it a bit more, adding the ascription of glory with which all modern versions now conclude. Those who question the reliability of the gospel accounts on the basis of their diversity are imposing unfair standards of logical consistency that would never be applied to any other literature.

Not unrelated to this is a more general philosophical scepticism towards any document, whether ancient or modern, that appears to give credence to the possibility of the occurrence of unique, or apparently miraculous happenings. Academic biblical study still generally operates within a mechanistic world-view, according to which the universe is understood as a closed system, operating according to rigidly structured 'laws of

nature' which are entirely predictable and never deviate. By definition, therefore, the unpredictable cannot happen, and on this view it is inevitable that the gospels should be seen as something other than history, for they do contain accounts of a number of unique happenings which appear to violate the 'laws of nature' as set out by Newtonian science. Physics, of course, no longer operates on that paradigm, and the work of more recent theorists has led to the emergence of a far more flexible understanding of what might be possible within the physical universe. Philosophers and theologians frequently have a lot to say about the emergence of so-called postmodernity, but on the whole they have yet to accept its implications, not least because it would put their own work in a wider context, as just one possible way among many others of understanding the nature of reality. This is not the place for an extensive engagement with this narrow-minded philosophical stance, except to observe that it is part of the legacy of Western imperialism and colonialism, which has already been superseded by cutting-edge science and which will need to be jettisoned by theologians if they are to be capable of engaging creatively with the wider experience of the human race. To say that unique events cannot happen, or that the supernatural does not exist, when most people of most ethnic groups at most points in history have claimed otherwise, is merely to perpetuate the intellectual arrogance of previous generations of Western thinkers, and far from providing an answer to the questions raised by history it merely begs larger and more important questions about the nature of Western intellectual culture.

## Positive evidence

In addition to these general factors, the case for the overall authenticity of the gospels can be made in relation to a number of specific positive considerations as well.

## Inscriptions and artifacts

The gospel stories show direct and specific knowledge of life in Palestine at the time of Jesus, and give a generally authentic image of life in that culture, even though some of their writers were certainly not at home in Palestine, and one (Luke) was not a Jew at all. They were all writing after the events they describe, most of them at a time when the face of the country had been irreversibly changed by the devastation of a major war between Romans and guerrilla fighters (A.D.66–70), and they compiled their books in places geographically far removed from the scene of Jesus' ministry. They must have been relying on information that went back much further in time and which was based on actual knowledge of the places and people mentioned, for archaeological finds have regularly shown the gospel writers to have been correct even in cases where they were once thought to be mistaken.

## Language

There is also the fact that behind the teachings of Jesus (recorded in the gospels in Greek) it is possible to trace clear echoes of the language of rural Palestine: Aramaic. Even the gospels written in Greek occasionally preserve Aramaic expressions—like the words from the cross ([Matthew 27:46](#)), or the call to Jairus' daughter ([Mark 5:41](#)), or the name of 'the Pavement' in Jerusalem ([John 19:13](#)). At other points, notably in the Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 5–7](#)), when sayings of Jesus are translated back into Aramaic they display literary features that would only have made sense in that language. Much of Jesus' teaching is preserved in the form of Aramaic poetry, recognizable even in an English translation, which at times displays features such as alliteration and assonance that could have had meaning only in Aramaic. Such facts do not of course 'prove' that Jesus spoke these words. Strictly speaking, the most they can show is that they go back to a form in which they were preserved by Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Christians. But for that reason they favour the authenticity of the gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching, for they link them with a time shortly after the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, when many eyewitnesses must still have been alive to challenge any accounts

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which did not present an authentic image of him.

## Distinctiveness

Another striking fact is that the gospels are different in every way from the rest of the New Testament. They are of course different in literary genre, for much of the rest consists of letters written by various Christian leaders to their friends. But their fundamental concerns are also very different from what is known of the life and circumstances of the early Gentile churches. It is wrong to imagine that, because the gospels were written to serve the needs of the churches, they are little more than a mirror reflecting the life of those early communities, for the rest of the New Testament shows that the church had many needs that are not even remotely addressed in the gospels.

There is, for example, no real teaching on the church itself, something that is so obvious a gap that we found it necessary to ask in an earlier chapter whether Jesus had been interested in founding a church at all. Even baptism, which from the start was the rite of initiation into the Christian community, is never mentioned by Jesus, apart from one isolated instance ([Matthew 28:19](#)). Jesus himself did not baptize, nor did he make baptism a central part of his teaching, yet this was a matter of great importance to the early church, and if they did indeed make a regular practice of manufacturing ‘sayings of Jesus’ to meet their needs, it is difficult to understand why they would not have chosen to do so on such a significant topic.

We find the same lack of specific guidance on other crucial subjects. Very soon after Jesus’ death there was a wide-ranging controversy over the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Christian community. This was a major practical issue, for the two groups needed to get along with each other in the church, and their habits were often quite different. But it was also a theological question, for if Jesus was the Messiah, then how did being one of his followers relate to those who were part of the people of God in the faith tradition to which the Hebrew scriptures bore witness? Church leaders wrestled with that question for a long time, and if only Jesus had said something on it, much heart-searching and acrimony could no doubt have been avoided. There must have been great pressure for somebody to invent a ‘saying of Jesus’ that would provide the definitive answer, and yet there is no sign at all of that happening.

In other respects also the gospels preserve their own distinctive emphasis when compared with the rest of the New Testament. Whereas the term ‘Son of man’ is the most widely used name for Jesus in the gospels, it hardly appears anywhere else, and the same is true of ‘the kingdom of God’, which was the heart of Jesus’ teaching, but virtually never features in the rest of the New Testament. The fact is that if we were to try to reconstruct the church’s life situation from the gospels, we would never produce the kind of picture that is painted in the New Testament letters, for there are so many features of the gospel stories about Jesus that are quite different from the life and concerns of the early church.

Taken overall, facts such as these seem to suggest that, at the very least, the burden of proof must be with those who wish to deny the accuracy of the gospel accounts of Jesus, rather than with those who wish to assume that the gospels preserve a generally authentic picture of Jesus as he actually was. That is not to say they contain something akin to a photographic record of his life, but then they never claimed to do so. Nor does it entail the belief that the gospels contain an exact word-for-word account of all Jesus’ teaching—but they do not claim that either. The evangelists were not mere recorders of tradition, but were interpreters of the facts handed on to them. The gospels are more like portraits than photographs, for they present Jesus through the eyes of those who knew his teaching and admired his example. Far from invalidating their stories, this very fact makes what they have written more true to life, and more accessible to their readers, because it enables these narratives to speak in the common language of humanity, addressing the issues that have concerned people searching for the meaning of life at all times and in all places. It is this quality that has ensured the adaptability of the gospels to many different cultures, and that will guarantee that future generations continue to be fascinated by the person who is their central character.

## Identifying the authentic words of Jesus

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How can we be sure that the gospels contain the teaching of Jesus, and not the impressions of the early church about him? Through all its stages this has been one of the central questions within the quest for the historical Jesus, and some of the techniques that have been developed to try to answer it are sufficiently important to merit a separate discussion here. In particular, in the period of the so-called second or new quest (roughly 1950–70), a series of criteria were devised which are still often claimed to be a reliable means of identifying the authentic teaching of Jesus in the gospels. These criteria were most comprehensively expounded in a 1967 book by Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, which outlined three separate tests, or criteria, on the basis of which it was concluded that at least three areas of Jesus' teaching in the gospels could be shown to be authentic: the parables, the teaching on the kingdom of God, and the themes mentioned in the Lord's prayer.

### The criterion of dissimilarity, or distinctiveness

This criterion had already been recommended by Rudolf Bultmann, in his book *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921), and was based on the assumption that anything in Jesus' teaching that might be paralleled in either Judaism or the theology of the early church must be of doubtful authenticity for it could have come into the gospels from either of those two sources rather than from an authentic reminiscence of Jesus. So the only points at which we may be sure that we are in direct contact with Jesus himself is in places where Jesus' teaching is totally unique and distinctive. Typical examples might be Jesus' use of the word *Abba* in his address to God, or his characteristic way of beginning important statements with the word *Amen*, which as far as we know were devices used neither by the Jewish rabbis nor by the early church.

It can scarcely be denied that, in Perrin's words, information retrieved from the gospels by this means would represent 'an irreducible minimum of historical knowledge' about Jesus. But on closer examination, it is doubtful whether even this modest claim can be fully justified on the basis of this particular method. For its successful use depends entirely on the further assumption that our present knowledge of both Judaism and the early church is more or less complete. The fact is, however, that very little is known about the form of Judaism at the time of Jesus, and the New Testament itself is one of the few contemporary accounts of Jewish practice in the early first century. New information is constantly being discovered and assessed, and with it new parallels to the teaching of Jesus are certain to emerge. As a method, therefore, the criterion of distinctiveness is a counsel of despair, and by using it, it could only be a matter of time before the logical outcome was reached: that nothing certain could be known about Jesus. This, together with the intrinsic implausibility of the notion that Jesus would be completely isolated from his environment, led to the emergence of the third quest. A Jesus who was unique in the sense that his teaching was totally detached from both Judaism and the church was unlikely ever to be the real Jesus.

In addition, though, there are large and important areas of the gospels where this method is of no use at all even within its own presuppositions. Using it to analyse the major titles ascribed to Jesus ('Messiah', 'Son of God', 'Son of man') could only ever have led to the conclusion that Jesus gave no teaching about his own destiny and person, for all of them were used by someone in the early church. The outcome would be the same on Jesus' eschatology, for that can also be paralleled in Jewish and early Christian sources. Even the distinctive teaching of the Sermon on the Mount would have to be jettisoned for the same reasons, for Paul shows a clear knowledge of that in [Romans 12–14](#), as also does the epistle of James. There was always therefore a basic fault in the whole concept of this approach: it must inevitably lead, both theoretically and practically, to the claim that nothing useful can be known about Jesus from the gospels.

### The criterion of 'coherence'

Those who still use these criteria are not unaware of the problems involved with the principle of dissimilarity. Perrin therefore put forward another one which could be used in conjunction with it: the criterion of coherence. This is based on the assumption that any material in the gospels that is compatible with the teaching which passes the dissimilarity test can also be counted as a genuine statement of what Jesus said and did.

On the face of it, this further criterion seems promising, but of course it is very heavily dependent on a successful application of the first one. We have already seen the difficulties involved in this, and if it leads to no sure results then this second test is also useless. In any case it is very difficult to judge what is 'coherent' and what is not: what seems coherent to us would not necessarily have seemed so to the early church.

### The criterion of multiple attestation

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This one goes back to the earliest stages of the quest for the historical Jesus, and has been widely used by scholars of many different persuasions, not only those who adopted a form-critical methodology. On this criterion, teaching mentioned in the gospels is genuinely from Jesus if it is found in more than one gospel source. This is a useful test as far as it goes, for if Mark and Q give a similar impression of the content of Jesus' teaching then it is reasonable to believe that it is an authentic impression. But this criterion also faces a number of difficulties, though they are not as great as the problems involved in operating the other two:

- It is not possible by this means to say anything about specific statements attributed to Jesus, for there are very few stories or sayings that are contained in more than one of the gospel sources. Indeed this fact is one of the foundations of the whole source-critical approach to the gospels. If the same teaching was found everywhere, there would have been no need for any explanation of the relationships between the various gospels. This means that the most this method can discover is the general tone of Jesus' teaching, rather than a detailed account of it.
- It also has another built-in limitation, for it would presumably dismiss as inauthentic those parts of Jesus' teaching that are found in only one gospel source. Yet this is the case with some of the most distinctive parts of Jesus' teaching. Using this test, stories such as the good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25–37](#)) or the lost son ([Luke 15:11–32](#)) would be excluded altogether from an account of Jesus' life and teaching, because they are found only in Luke's Gospel.
- To be applied convincingly, this criterion needs to assume the existence of a fairly rigid distinction between the various gospel sources, such as Burnett Hilman Streeter (1874–1937) proposed in 1924 in his classic presentation of the four-document hypothesis. But more recent study has shown that the question of the relationships between the gospels and their sources is far more complex than that, and the traditions underlying the gospels in their present form must have been both more diverse and more fluid.

### A basic flaw

The problems involved in using these criteria to identify the authentic words of Jesus within the gospels highlight a more fundamental flaw in the whole method represented by them. For they all begin from the basic assumption that the gospels mostly contain the beliefs of the early church and only a very little, if anything at all, that comes directly from Jesus himself. Perrin himself gave two main reasons to justify this built-in pessimism:

- 'The early church made no attempt to distinguish between the words the earthly Jesus had spoken and those spoken by the risen Lord through a prophet in the community, nor between the original teaching of Jesus and the new understanding and reformulation of that teaching reached in ... the church under the guidance of the Lord of the church.' An alleged model for this might be found in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation, where the Christian prophet John delivers messages from the heavenly Christ to seven churches in Asia Minor. Paul also mentions prophets working in the church ([1 Corinthians 12:27–31](#)), and it is often argued that their main function was to issue 'sayings of Jesus' to meet some specific need in the church's life. Though this argument has been quite widely accepted, a number of significant objections can be made against it.

Firstly, it is based on very precarious evidence. Though it is often confidently stated that the role of the Christian prophet was to invent sayings of Jesus, there is in fact very little hard evidence to show what the prophets did in the early church. The messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation are quite irrelevant, for a clear distinction is made there between the experience and words of the writer of the book and what is reported as a message from the risen Christ. The only episode where prophets are shown at work is in [Acts 13:1–3](#), where they give instructions regarding the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas. Even these instructions, however, are not said to have been given in the name of Jesus, but with the authority of the Holy Spirit. This kind of evidence is so slight that it can provide only the vaguest indication of what prophets might most typically have done in the context of the church.

Secondly, the assumption that prophets could freely invent 'sayings of Jesus' also assumes that the first Christians made no clear distinction between Jesus' teaching and their own. Again, there is no hard evidence for this. Paradoxically, such evidence as there is comes most clearly from the writings of Paul, who is the New Testament writer most often accused of showing a disregard for the teachings of Jesus, and who also claimed more than once to have a greater measure of charismatic endowments than most of his contemporaries ([1 Corinthians 14:18–19](#); [2 Corinthians 12:1–10](#)). These two facts alone would make him an ideal candidate to have been a purveyor of 'sayings of Jesus', and it might be expected that his letters would be full of such sayings, manufactured by himself under the influence of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of giving advice to his readers. In fact, the opposite is true, and in [1 Corinthians 7](#), for example, he goes out of his way to distinguish between his own opinions and the teaching of Jesus. Thirdly, another problem with the assumption that the early church freely manufactured sayings of Jesus is the self-justifying nature of the argument. The only 'evidence' that prophets regularly formulated

such sayings is the notion that the gospel traditions had their origin in the early church and not in the ministry of Jesus: a hypothetical life setting has been imagined for the gospels, which is then used to interpret the meaning of the gospels. It is not surprising that on this basis the gospels can be demonstrated to be products of the pious imagination of the early church for, like the liberal nineteenth-century 'lives of Jesus' which portrayed him in the image of their authors, the evidence has been put into the gospels rather than emerging as the end-product of the investigation.

- Perrin's second reason for scepticism has a firmer foundation. He asserts, quite correctly, that the primary aim of the gospels was not to give historical or biographical information about Jesus, but to edify readers. Everything in the gospels is there because it served a particular purpose in the church's life—and on that basis it is stated that the gospels are unlikely to contain historical reminiscences of Jesus as he actually was. This is another argument that is often asserted but seldom supported. There is no reason at all for a story or piece of teaching that conveys a practical or theological message of necessity to be historically false. That would be absurd. It is simply not a valid historical argument to propose that because the gospels and their contents were relevant to life in the middle of the first century, they can have had no historical context in the times of Jesus himself.

## Sayings of Jesus outside the New Testament

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At various points reference has been made to traditions about Jesus' life and teaching that are not found in the New Testament. Apart from Josephus and the rabbis, Jesus is also mentioned in the Latin authors Suetonius and Tacitus, as well as in the Qur'an. Some of the church leaders in the early centuries preserve a few fragments of teaching which they say was first given by Jesus, and in other parts of the New Testament itself there are occasional references to sayings of Jesus not found in the gospels (see, for example, [Acts 20:35](#)). But most attention has focused on a number of so-called 'infancy gospels' written in the second century and purporting to tell of the early childhood of Jesus, and the various Gnostic gospels, typified by the *Gospel of Thomas*.

The material preserved in these second-century sources is of a remarkably varied character. Much of it, especially in the infancy stories, is clearly legendary and was written to fill in the gaps that are left by the New Testament gospels. Many of the stories of these apocryphal infancy gospels are so unreal and pointless that they can immediately be seen to be of a quite different character from the New Testament accounts of Jesus.

Other questions are raised, however, by the collections of Jesus' sayings found in such documents as the gospels of *Philip* and *Thomas*, or the various papyri discovered at Oxyrhynchus in upper Egypt. Most of these documents were written for sectarian purposes, and many of them emanate from the various Gnostic groups that were prevalent in the second century and later. The *Gospel of Thomas* in its present form seems to date from about the fourth century, and was compiled for the purpose of supporting the life of an esoteric group in the church, almost certainly a Gnostic group. It consists entirely of sayings of Jesus, not narratives about him, and many of its contents are obviously derived from the New Testament, but presented with a Gnostic slant, while others have probably come in direct from some other Gnostic source.

Besides these, there are some others which appear to be of independent origin. For example, logion 82 of *Thomas* reads as follows: 'Jesus said, "He who is near me is near the fire, he who is far from me is far from the kingdom."' This particular saying was also known to Origen (A.D.185–254), and there might be allusions to it in other early Christian writers. It is certainly characteristic of the type of saying attributed to Jesus in the New Testament and, in addition, it has the form of Aramaic poetry, which again is a regular feature of Jesus' teaching in the four canonical gospels. There are a number of such sayings scattered about in the literature of the early church. When they do not teach any specially sectarian doctrine, and when they are in general agreement with the teaching of Jesus found in the New Testament, there seems to be no real reason for doubting that they could go back to authentic traditions about Jesus. If, as in the example we quoted, they also have the form of Semitic poetry, that is a further indication of their primitive character.

The fact that such information should have been preserved outside the New Testament is consistent with all that is known about the writing of the gospels. The author of *John*, for example, mentions many accounts of Jesus' life and teaching which he knew of but chose not to use in his own gospel ([John 20:30–31](#)). They must have existed somewhere, and perhaps some of them ended up in the various documents mentioned here. But it is important to notice that, by comparison with the vast number of extra-canonical traditions about Jesus, only a tiny proportion have even a slight claim to being genuine. The vast majority of the material is quite worthless as a historical source for knowledge of Jesus, and their real value lies more in highlighting the quality of information preserved in the canonical gospels themselves.