

8.1 Myth and History in the Gospels



Fig 8.1: Rylands fragment John 18:31-4 (Wilson I 30). This manuscript dating from c125 AD in Egypt confirms the gospel of John's existence by a date of perhaps 90 AD.

All of the gospels were written at least thirty years after Jesus' death, and cannot be relied upon for an accurate temporal account of Jesus' mission. The earliest works, Paul's epistles (c 48-55 AD) contain little information about Jesus except for his divine status.

There is no evidence the the four gospels were written by their alleged authors in the form they now stand.

It is now clear that Matthew and Luke are later works based on Mark (c 70 AD) as originally argued in 1835 by Lachmann and possibly also another synoptic sayings source "Q", whose content has recently been reconstructed, with John coming even later (c 90 AD). It has been suggested by Carsten Thiede that fragments of

Matthew held at Magdalen College Oxford date from c 70 AD, because of their archaic style of Greek which is otherwise confined to Qumran and sites such as Pompeii and Herculaneum, destroyed by the eruption of 79 AD. However this dating is contested by other experts (Wilson I 1996 22-3).

Eusebius notes that Papias the second century bishop of Hierapolis said that "Mark was the interpreter of Peter and wrote down carefully what he remembered of what had been said or done by the Lord, but not in the right order" (Ranke-Heinmann 1992 219, Graves and Podro 37), quoting John the Elder (Fox R 127), presumably the disciple. He also notes "Matthew compiled the sayings in the Hebrew (Aramaic?) language and each one translated them as he could". These Sayings or 'oracles' could have included Old Testament prophecies (Schonfield 234), or they could have been 'sayings', originally forming a work much like the Gospel of Thomas (Wilson I 44), which later became redacted to a story incorporating Mark's narrative. Papias believed Matthew to have written first which suggests his Matthew's work had been added to substantially (Fox R 127), otherwise Papias's statement is based on ignorance. Papias also notes Matthew being linked to an 'Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord' which may have been the five-fold Testimony Book (Schonfield 238). However John Mark appears as a companion of Paul, not Peter. (Ranke-Heinmann 1992 218-9).

Fig 8.2: One of the Magdalen fragments of Matthew attributed by Carsten Thiede to c 70 AD (Wilson I 22)



According to Wilson (I 36) the connection with Peter cannot have been very close, for Mark is somewhat vague about the locations of Gerasenes and to a certain extent Sidon. He suggests Mark could have been written in Rome for gentile

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culture with only a partial knowledge of Jewish law on divorce, which did not exist for wives: 10:12 "And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery." This would explain to some degree the generally anti-Jewish slant of the synoptic gospels and the relatively sympathetic treatment of the Romans. The difficulty is that this comment on divorce could equally have been a genuine statement by Jesus about Herodias' divorce of Herod Philip under Roman law (Hoehner 139). In "The Secret of Messiahship", Wrede, emphasizing that Mark had portrayed Jesus as concealing his messiahship and many of the disciples as not recognizing him until after his death, highlights the extent to which even 'primitive' Mark is concerned to present a specific theological viewpoint rather than historical narrative (Wilson I 36-7).

However Streeter has also suggested Matthew's gospel contains tradition from Antioch (Wilson I 40). "Many scholars think that Matthew lived outside of Palestine, perhaps in Antioch, the capital of Syria; he wrote as if he had been part of that thriving Jewish community and that Matthew's own group included both Jewish and Gentile believers." (Pagels 1995 75, 88). Luke is likewise placed in Antioch (Fox R 297). Elaine Pagels (1995 64-5) notes Krister Stendahl characterizing Matthew's gospel as a kind of community rule considerably more liberal than that of the Essenes, the Gospel of Luke, probably written by the only gentile author in the New Testament for a predominantly gentile community and the author of John, probably Jewish himself, writing possibly in Alexandria (8) or in Ephesus (Wilson I 41).

Matthew presents a combination of anti-Pharisaic polemic and a description of Jesus' teaching of fulfilling the law and the prophets in episodes such as the Sermon on the Mount, which can be seen as the work of a writer conscious of setting a competing tradition to the Pharisees, saying that the Christians are in effect the new hasidim in a similar vein to the polemic of the Essenes against the Jerusalem priesthood.

Since Mark did not write events in chronological order, we thus cannot rely on the order of the events in the synoptics (Mark, Luke, Matthew) which abound with inconsistencies with one another, nor in John, which disagrees with the others in significant ways all the way from the Baptism to the Crucifixion, such as placing the temple cleansing at the beginning of Jesus' mission, for any more than a spatial indication of where Jesus went and what he may have done. Many of the sayings in Luke and Matthew, including some in the Sermon on the Mount, appear in different parts of each gospel, so have been positioned later for narrative effect, rather than historical accuracy.

The synoptics' predominantly Galilean account, based on Mark, represents Jesus' mission as lasting approximately one year, beginning with a forty day sojourn in the desert, while John, which situates much of his action in Jerusalem cites three passovers (2:13, 6:4, 19:14) and has Jesus go to the wedding at Cana after the baptism. His year of birth veers from 12 BC (Fox R 34) to 6 AD (Schonfield). The baptism is dated by Luke to the 15th year of Tiberius 29 AD (Wilson I 58). However according to Josephus Philip didn't die until 33 or 34. So John could not have been beheaded before 34. The gospel accounts note the military commanders, placing it during the confrontation with Aretas. The estimated date of the crucifixion suggests AD 27, 30 or 33 or even 36 (Wilson I 58, Fox R 34, Schonfield 263) and Jesus' age at the time soars from thirty (Luke, Schonfield) through to fortysix (John, Fox R 35).

Critical analysis of the gospels began with a critical phase which eliminated large areas of the text as spurious. In 'On the Aims of Jesus and his Disciples', Hermann

Reimarus, posthumously for his own protection argued that Jesus was a failed Jewish revolutionary whose body had been stolen from the tomb to concoct the resurrection myth. This was followed by David Friedrich Strauß's 'The Life of Jesus Critically Examined' arguing on the basis of parallel passage discrepancies that none of authors of the gospels could have been eyewitnesses, but must have been later writers constructing their material from possibly garbled traditions about Jesus in circulation in the early Church.

Albert Schweitzer put the dilemma succinctly "There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the life of Jesus .. who came forward publically as the Messiah ... and dies to give his work its final consecration, never has any existence ... this image ... has fallen to pieces cleft and istintegrated by the concrete historical problems which have come to the surface one after the other."

Bultzmann's form criticism however proved to be even more devastating. Bultzmann eliminated from historical consideration any miraculous passages on the grounds that they were inserted to establish Jesus' divinity and any passages reflecting Old Testament sayings as an attempt to represent Jesus as fulfilling these prophecies. Likewise any statements which could alternatively be attributed to another contemporary such as Hillel in the case of 'do unto others' was eliminated as a derivative interpolation, and even Jesus' claim to forgive sins as in Mark 2:5 was eliminated as citing a Christian claim in the gospels. This stripped away virtually all material leaving Bultmann saying "I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary." resorting himself simply to the 'Christ of faith'

A counter swing began with British theologians who discovered a variety of Aramaic sources within the gospels atesting to older traditions contained in them. A charming example is the Pharisees regarding only the outer forms of existence (the cup) 11:40 "Ye fools, did not he that made that which is without make that which is within also? But rather give alms of such things as ye have; and, behold, all things are clean unto you." This turns out to be inexpertly translated Aramaic 'zakkau' to give alms instead of 'dakkau' to cleanse, as is correctly done in Matt 23:26 "Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also." Some passages of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount lie wise stand as Aramaic translations.

One of the clearest countercurrents emerges with the latest of the gospels, John, which as a result of the Rylands fragment cannot be dated later than 90 AD. Previously much of the gnostic light and darkness of John was thought to be Hellenistic invention, but with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it was realized that this very emphasis now looks particularly Essene. "The whole gospel is replete with phrases such as 'the spirit of truth', 'the light of life', 'walking in the darkness', 'children of light' and 'eternal life'" paralleling of the Manual of Discipline, as is the style and content of many passages.

John's prologue 1:2:

*The same was in the beginning with God.
All things were made by him;
and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

is strikingly close to the Manual of Discipline 11:11:

All things come to pass by his knowledge,

*He establishes all things by his design
And without him nothing is done.*

Further historical credibility for John comes from the discovery of both the five porticos of the Pool of Siloam 9:7 and the 'Gabbatha' or pavement 19:13 where Pilate was said to have judged Jesus.

Aileen Guilding in *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* has also explained the three year period of John's mission of Jesus in terms of a three year cycle of the readings of the Torah for the cycle of Jewish festivals (Wilson I 48).

The determining historical event for the ambiguities and indeed the entire tradition of the gospels appears to be the Jewish revolt of 66 AD and the sacking of Jerusalem in 70. Walter Kümmel thus see the inclusion of Mark 13:2 "And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." (cf Luke 21:6, Matt 24:2) as evidence for an after the event prophecy of the fall. However Robinson cites the Temple tax demanded at Capernaum (Matt 17:24) and the faithful inclusion of Jesus' prophecies of his return in the first generation (Mark 13:30, Matt 24:34, Luke 21:32) as elements at least pre-dating the fall which are accepted as holding good at the time of writing of the final versions (Wilson I 49).

Thus while the gospels may contain theological and anti-Jewish polemic, they nevertheless 'would not be led by that fact to pervert and utterly destroy the historical kernel'.

They appear to have been constructed upon collections of older Aramaic sayings and as literature read as C. S. Lewis has noted very much in the manner of 'reportage' as opposed to romantic myth. Names such as Lazarus are in Galilean form rather than the Eleazar of Jerusalem (Wilson I 49, 70).

8.2 The Dilemma of the "Historical Yeshua"

A further feature of the recent historical debate is the idea that Paul has invented his own inauthentic brand of Christianity and that Jesus, was not a sacrificial figure but a Jewish zealot, who, at an extreme (Eisenman) was the martyred Zealot whose movement was responsible for the sea of Galilee running red with blood in the uprising of 66-8. This is inconsistent with many strands of historical and archaeological evidence.

While it is acknowledged that the emphasis on the flesh and blood of the sacrament is a little more pagan in its style than that of the Essene sacred repast, the Essenes still had the sacred repast of bread and wine and a tradition of messianic atonement. The wording of the communion offering of bread and wine remains almost identical to the Jewish Kiddush. This difference is more subtle.

Although it is true that the first bishop of the Christian church was indeed James the Just, who was a very devout Jew, as well as leader of the Jerusalem church, this does not mean that Jesus is in any way a reflection of James. Jesus was clearly a charismatic innovator in a family of devout ones, who in the collision course of his atonement mission gained deeper and more universal perspective on reality which has given his parables and mission its uniqueness to this day. His reported difference with his family indicate these difference of approach. It is true that there was considerable tensions between the circumcising Jewish Christians who followed the law and "Paul's" gentiles who made faith, rather than good works the key to their belief, but this does not mean that the historical Jesus can be stripped down to a humble Jewish peasant of no vision or originality.

Another approach illustrated by Crossan is to reject the integrity of the narrative stories while accepting the root sayings, particularly those of the Gospel of Thomas, as definitive. I embrace with unreserved love Crossan's analysis of the sayings, but reject the historical approach which denies the overall narrative because of obvious inconsistencies in how the sayings are stitched together. The parable of the mosaic is that the whole picture can be seen even if the pieces are mere patches which are misaligned in many places locally. While Pagels is correct in highlighting the social historical slant of the polemic in the gospels, and while one should look at certain episodes, particularly those concerning the relationships with James as being distorted or even factually embroidered, the general view of Christs' mission stands.

It should be noted that the Ebionite view of the spiritual illumination of Jesus is significantly different from that of the divine Son of God however, for they believed the adoptionist view that Jesus became divinely inspired at his baptism and that this inspiration departed again in the Crucifixion. This view places Jesus in the tradition of the secret Adam, the recurring spiritual archetype of the good or just visionary man.

8.3 The Son in the Flesh

The name Jesus, Yeshua or Joshua meaning 'god saves' was a common one. Four of the 28 high priests of the era were called Jesus. By contrast 'of Nazareth' remains doubtful because of the lack of firm historical corroboration before the 3rd century. The title Nazarene or Nazorean is consistent with the Greek texts. Capernaum however is attested to in a fertile region of Genessaret. Many of Jesus' sayings from the mustard seed to the broody hen display knowledge of rural life, and from the mote to the corner-stone are consistent with his attribution to being a carpenter or carpenter's son (Wilson I 66-71). Jesus' personal reference to God as Abba - father, rather than Yhwh-Adonai is an Aramaic idiom which was also shared by the grandson of the first century nabi Honi the 'circle drawer' (Crossan 142).

In "The Historical Evidence for Jesus", G. A. Wells argues that Jesus did not even exist as an historical person, citing Paul's lack of detail of his life, including the parables, the miracles, his trial, and Jerusalem as his place of execution, claiming Jesus is merely a figment of Paul's imagination. The gospels similarly lack any physical description and early depictions are diverse and probably incorrect as many are un-Jewishly beardless. However the aspects of Paul's writing can be explained by his lack of interest in the historical Jesus as opposed to the resurrected one who was about to return (Wilson I 51).

John Allegro (1979) in a different twist, suggested Jesus was the eucharistic code word for a magic mushroom cult which shared the sacred repast of divine communion.

References to Jesus outside biblical sources remain scanty. Tacitus mentions somewhat later Christians put to death by Nero, whose 'originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate' but this is a much later reference. Suetonius' reference to Chrestus has also been interpreted as other Jewish Zealots seeking support (Wilson I 58).

Josephus' famous passage on Jesus (c 92 AD) is widely regarded as a Christian interpolation, however his later reference to the unjust execution in 62 AD of James 'the brother of Jesus called the Christ' sounds authentic. Origen (c250) expressed astonishment that Josephus while, disbelieving Jesus was the messiah, should speak so warmly of James, implying that Josephus did originally document the existence of

Jesus (Wilson I 60-1).

However, despite their negative view of Jesus, early Jewish sources clearly treat him as an historical rather than a mythical character.

Luke's and Matthew's accounts of his birth remain in mythical territory. The historical events which follow the divine conception are contradictory with one another and are clearly designed to imbue his early life with the aura of a divine incarnation. As both his genealogies having a genetic break at Joseph, it is impossible to verify that he was a descendent of King David, who could, on this basis, claim to be a kingly Messiah.

8.4 And I Saw the Heavens Opened

The only accounts of the life of Jesus which can in any way be interpreted as having an historical basis begin with his baptism by John and end with the crucifixion. Details of his personal life are so lacking that he remains largely an enigma.

The view of the synoptics is that Jesus was baptised by John and the heavens opened and the spirit of God descended like a dove upon him, either subjectively, as in Mark or objectively as in John. We can thus surmise that John's baptism in some way precipitated Jesus' mission. Although John is systematically diminished in the Christian gospels, this suggests it was John's empowerment which precipitated Jesus' mission.

Whether Jesus retreated for forty days in a replay of Moses on the mountain is specious. Both Jesus and John appear to have been raised in the Way of the Wilderness and known the Essene, or Nazarean prophecies of the Last Days and the idea of the Messiah as Suffering Servant intimately. Since John's imprisonment immediately pronounces Jesus' mission (Mark 1:14) there a possibility that the two are linked and that having empowered Jesus and possibly having anointed him during his sojourn in the desert, John then set an example of the Suffering Servant by preaching against Herodias, leading to his imprisonment. This is also consistent with Jesus spending some time in retreat coming to terms with the difficult agenda of the suffering messiah - his temptation to avoid a painful fate. On the other hand, Jesus' mission may have been an independent movement which picked up popularity and significance as a result of John's imprisonment. We later have both Luke 7:19 and Matthew 11:3 saying John sent two disciples to see if Jesus was 'he that should come' suggesting there was no immediate recognition of Jesus as a messiah by John at the time of the Baptism. Nevertheless Jesus is now certain of his intentions.

Schonfield (41) notes : We have to accept the absolute sincerity of Jesus. No one could be more sure of his vocation than was Jesus, and not even the threat of imminent death by the horrible torture of crucifixion could make him deny his messiahship. But this does not require us to think of him as omniscient and infallible. It is possible to hold that the Messianic Hope was not only a justifiable but indeed an inspired conception, and yet in many respects the predictions and expectations of the interpreters of the Scriptures could be quite wrong. It is one thing to see visions and dream dreams, and quite another when it is demanded that such visions and dreams be acted out on the plane of history in all their apocalyptic grandeur. But he had no control over what lay beyond, and in much that he anticipated he was mistaken. The Church had to face before very long the acute problem of the postponement of his expectations, and dealt with it rather lamely and unconvincingly by largely spiritualising them.

Jesus then establishes his mission, which is clearly in style and spirit of the Northern Kingdom, rather than Jerusalem, and centered on Galilee. He does this as one of the

theraputae who performs faith healing, and through preaching, in the synagogues and in areas round the shores of Galilee. He is a charismatic figure with a keen reputation as a healer, drawing hysterical crowds and possessing a direct knowledge of the scriptures, combined with prophetic gnosis "and he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22). The same was true in Jerusalem John 7:15 "And the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?" These reports attest to the likelihood that he had considerable early training with the 'Holy Ones' both in the prophetic interpretation of scripture and in spiritual healing. His first healing in Mark attests as much: "I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God" - A Nazarean prophet, or nabi preaching in a Pharisaic synagogue.

It is clear however that although John fasted and led a life of renunciation he was no Essene, for he baptised publicans and sinners. Jesus, took this even further than John, who lived in camel hair and eat locusts and wild honey, for Jesus ate with publicans and sinners in sumptuous style which aroused disapproval of the Pharisees. This picture is consistent with people who are familiar with Essene tradition and follow the Way of the Wilderness and are applying Last Days eschatology in the same way, but to all sinners rather than the elect remnant of Israel alone. In this perspective, Jesus' teaching is an extension of the trend already seen in the Baptist.