A Brief Introduction to the New Testament

Bart D. Ehrman
What to Expect

People who read the New Testament Gospels today generally assume that these books tell stories about Jesus simply as they happened. But is that true? None of these writers claims to be an eyewitness. And they wrote their accounts decades after the fact in a different language (Greek) from the one Jesus spoke (Aramaic).

Where did these writers get their stories? Did they simply drop out of the sky? Were they passed down by stenographers who followed Jesus and recorded everything he said and did? Did they come from notes taken by his disciples on their journeys? From somewhere else? Moreover, who were these authors? And what kind of books did they write?

We have already touched on one of the ironies involved in the historical study of the New Testament. If we choose to begin our study not with the earliest New Testament author, Paul, but with the person on whom his religion is in some sense based, Jesus, then we are compelled to begin by examining books that were written after Paul. Indeed, some of these books were among the last New Testament books to be produced. To reach the beginning, we have to start near the end.

Oral Traditions Behind the Gospels

For the moment, we will leave aside the question of who these authors were (see "Some Additional Reflections" at the end of the chapter), except to point out that all of the New Testament Gospels are anonymous: their authors did not sign their names. Our principal concern at present involves a different issue, namely how and where these anonymous authors acquired their stories about Jesus. Here we are in the fortunate position of having
some definite information, for one of these authors deals directly with this matter. Luke (we do not know his real name) begins his Gospel by mentioning earlier written accounts of Jesus' life and by indicating that both he and his predecessors acquired their information from Christians who had told stories about him (Luke 1:1-4). That is to say, these writings ultimately were based on oral traditions, stories that had circulated among Christians from the time Jesus died to the moment the Gospel writers put pen to paper. How much of an interval, exactly, was this?

No one knows for certain when Jesus died, but scholars agree that it was sometime around 30 C.E. In addition, most historians think that Mark was the first of our Gospels to be written, sometime between the mid 60s to early 70s. Matthew and Luke were probably produced some ten or fifteen years later, perhaps around 80 or 85. John was written perhaps ten years after that, in 90 or 95. These are necessarily rough estimates, but almost all scholars agree within a few years.

Perhaps the most striking thing about these dates for the historian is the long interval between Jesus' death and the earliest accounts of his life. Our first written narratives of Jesus (i.e., the Gospels) appear to date from thirty-five to sixty-five years after the fact. This may not seem like a long time, but think about it in modern terms. For the shortest interval (the gap between Jesus and Mark), this would be like having the first written record of Lyndon Johnson's presidency appear today. For the longest interval (between Jesus and John), it would be like having stories about a famous preacher from the early years of World War II show up in print for the first time this week. We should not assume that the Gospel accounts are necessarily unreliable simply because they are late, but the dates should give us pause. What was happening over these thirty, forty, fifty, or sixty years between Jesus' death and the writing of the Gospels?

Without a doubt, the most important thing that was happening for early Christianity was the spread of the religion from its inauspicious beginnings as a tiny sect of Jesus' Jewish followers in Jerusalem—the Gospels indicate that there were eleven men and several women who remained faithful to him after his crucifixion, say a total of fifteen or twenty people altogether—to its status as a world religion enthusiastically supported by Christian believers in major urban areas throughout the Roman Empire. Missionaries like Paul actively propagated the faith, converting Jews and Gentiles to faith in Christ as the Son of God, who was crucified for the sins of the world and then raised by God from the dead.

By the end of the first century, this tiny group of Jesus' disciples had so multiplied that there were believing communities in cities of Judea and Samaria and Galilee, probably in the region East of Jordan; in Syria, Cilicia, and Asia Minor; in Macedonia and Achaia (modern-day Greece); in Italy; and possibly in Spain. By this time Christian churches may have sprung up in the Southern Mediterranean, probably in Egypt and possibly in North Africa.

To be sure, the Christians did not take the world by storm. Roman officials in the provinces appear to have taken little notice of the Christians until the second century; strikingly, there is not a single reference to Jesus or his followers in pagan literature of any kind during the first century of the Common Era. Nonetheless, the Christian religion quietly and persistently spread, not converting millions of people, but almost certainly converting thousands, in numerous locations throughout the entire Mediterranean.

![Figure 4.1 Time Line of the Early Christian Movement.](image-url)

![Figure 4.2 What did they ever do? Examples of and some int letters (e.g., representati reasons for mission was ing, say on as individua was the Sot found faith as well. Since, in a way of see ably not toc)
CHAPTER 4 THE TRADITIONS OF JESUS IN THEIR GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

FIGURE 4.2. Christian Churches in Existence by 100 C.E.

What did Christians tell people in order to convert them? Our evidence here is frustratingly sparse: examples of missionary sermons in the book of Acts and some intimations of Paul's preaching in his own letters (e.g., 1 Thess 1:9–10). We cannot tell how representative these are. Moreover, there are good reasons for thinking that most of the Christian mission was conducted not through public preaching, say on a crowded street corner, but privately, as individuals who had come to believe that Jesus was the Son of God told others about their newfound faith and tried to convince them to adopt it as well.

Since, in the Greco-Roman world, religion was a way of securing the favor of the gods, we are probably not too far afield to think that if faith in Jesus were known to produce beneficial, or even miraculous, results, then people might be persuaded to convert. If a Christian testified, for example, that praying to Jesus, or through Jesus to God, had healed her daughter, or that a believer in Jesus had cast out an evil spirit, or that the God of Jesus had miraculously provided food for a starving family, this might spark interest in her neighbor or co-worker. Those with an interest in Jesus would want to learn more about him. Who was he? When did he live? What did he do? How did he die? The Christian, in turn, would be both compelled and gratified to tell stories about Jesus to anyone interested.

Such opportunities to tell stories about Jesus must have presented themselves throughout major urban areas of the Mediterranean for decades prior
to the writing of the Gospels. Otherwise there is no way to account for the spread of the religion in an age that did not enjoy the benefits of telecommunication. When people had heard enough (however much that might have been), they might have decided to believe in Jesus. This would have involved, among other things, adopting aspects of Jesus' own religion, which for non-Jews meant accepting the Jewish God and abandoning their own, since Jews maintained that this One alone was the true God. Once the converts did so, they could join the Christian community by being baptized and receiving some rudimentary instruction. Presumably it was the leaders of the Christian congregation who performed the baptisms and taught the converts. These leaders would have been the earliest people to adopt the new religion in the locality or people with special gifts for leadership, possibly the more highly educated among them, who were therefore best suited to giving instruction.

We do not know exactly what the leaders would have told new converts, but we can imagine that they would have imparted some of the essentials of the faith: information about the one true God, his creation, and his son Jesus. To some extent, this would have involved telling yet other stories about who Jesus was, about how he came into the world, about what he taught, what he did, why he suffered, and how he died. Stories about Jesus were thus being told throughout the Mediterranean for decades, both to win people to faith and to edify those who had been brought in. They were told in evangelism, in instruction, and probably in services of worship. The stories would have, necessarily, been passed on by word of mouth, since, as we've seen, the Gospels had not yet been written. But who told the stories?

Unfortunately, we do not know the precise identity of those who were telling the stories about Jesus. Was every story told by one of the apostles? Impossible. The mission goes on for years and years and years all over the map. Were the stories told by other eyewitnesses? Equally impossible. They must have been told, then, for the most part, by people who had not been there to see them happen, who had heard them from other people, who also had not been there to see them happen. The stories were passed on by word of mouth from one convert to the next. They were told in different countries, in Egypt, Judea, Galilee, Syria, and Cilicia, throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, Achaia, Italy, and Spain. They were told in different contexts, for different reasons, at different times. They were told in a language other than Jesus' own (he spoke Aramaic, while most of the converts spoke Greek), often by people who were not Jews, almost always by people who were not eyewitnesses and had never met an eyewitness.

Let me illustrate the process with a hypothetical example. Suppose I am a Greek-speaking worshipper of the goddess Artemis at Ephesus. I listen to a stranger passing through town, who tells of the wonders of Jesus, of his miracles and supernatural wisdom. I become intrigued. When I hear that this wandering stranger has performed miracles in Jesus' name—my neighbor's son was ill, but two days after the stranger prayed over him, he became well—I decide to inquire further. He tells of how Jesus performed great miracles and of how, even though wrongly accused by the Romans for sedition and crucified, he was raised by God from the dead. Based on everything I've heard, I decide to forego my devotion to Artemis. I put my faith in Jesus, get baptized, and join the local community.

I take a trip for business to nearby Smyrna. While there, I tell friends about my new faith and the stories I've learned about my new Lord. Three of them join me in becoming Christian. They begin to discuss these things with their neighbors and friends. Mostly they are rejected, but they acquire several converts, enough to come together once a week for worship, to discuss their faith, and to tell more stories. These new converts tell their own families the stories, converting some of them, who then take the word yet further afield.

And so it goes. As the new converts tell the stories, the religion grows, and most of the people telling the stories are not eyewitnesses. Indeed they have never laid eyes on an eyewitness or anyone else who has.

This example does not imply that if we had accounts based on eyewitnesses, they would necessarily be accurate. Even the testimonies of eyewitnesses can, and often do, conflict. But the scenario I have painted does help to explain why there are so many differences in the stories about Jesus that have survived from the early years of Christianity.
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These stories were circulated year after year after
year, primarily by people who had believed their
entire lives that the gods were sometimes present
on earth, who knew of miracle workers who had
appeared to benefit the human race, who had
themselves heard fantastic stories about this Jewish
holy man Jesus, and who were trying to convert
others to their faith or to edify those who had al-
ready been converted. Furthermore, nearly all of
these storytellers had no independent knowledge of
what really happened. It takes little imagination to
realize what happened to the stories.

You are probably familiar with the old birthday
party game “telephone.” A group of kids sits in a cir-
cle, the first tells a brief story to the one sitting next
to her, who tells it to the next, and to the next, and
so on, until it comes back full circle to the one who
started it. Invariably, the story has changed so much
in the process of retelling that everyone gets a good
laugh. (If it didn’t work this way, who would play the
game?) Imagine this same activity taking place, not
in a solitary living room with ten kids on one after-
noon, but over the expanse of the Roman Empire
(some 2,500 miles across), with thousands of partic-
pants—from different backgrounds, with different
concerns, and in different contexts—some of whom
have to translate the stories into different languages
(see box 4.1).

The situation, in fact, was even more complica-
ted than that. People in the Christian communi-

ties that sprang up around the Mediterranean,
like people just about everywhere, encountered
severe difficulties in living their daily lives and
thus sought help and direction from on high. The
traditions about Jesus were part of the bedrock of
these communities; his actions were a model that
Christians tried to emulate; his words were teach-
ings they obeyed. Given this context, is it concei-
vable that Christians could have made up a
story that proved useful in a particular situation?
Creating a story is not far removed from changing
one, and presumably people would have good rea-
sions for doing both.

Christians would not have to be deceitful or
malicious to invent a story about something that
Jesus said or did; they would not even have to be
conscious of doing so. All sorts of stories about people are made up without ill intent, and sometimes stories are told about persons that we know are not historically accurate: ask any well-known person who is widely talked about, a politician, religious leader, or university professor.

The Nature of the Gospel Traditions

It does not appear that the authors of the early Gospels were eyewitnesses to the events that they narrate. But they must have gotten their stories from somewhere. Indeed, one of them acknowledges that he has heard stories about Jesus and read earlier accounts (Luke 1:1–4). In the opinion of most New Testament scholars, it is possible that in addition to preserving genuine historical recollections about what Jesus actually said and did, these authors also narrated stories that had been modified, or even invented, in the process of retelling.

The notion that the Gospels contain at least some stories that had been changed over the years is not pure speculation; in fact, we have hard evidence of this preserved in the Gospels themselves (we will examine some of this evidence in a moment). We also have reason to think that early Christians were not particularly concerned that stories about Jesus were being changed. Odd as it may seem to us, most believers appear to have been less concerned than we are about what we would call the facts of history. Even though we as twenty-first-century persons tend to think that something cannot be true unless it happened, ancient Christians, along with a lot of other ancient people, did not think this way. For them, something could be true whether or not it happened. What mattered more than historical fact was what we might call religious or moral truth.

On one level, even modern people consider "moral truth" to be more important than historical fact. That is, they will occasionally concede that something can be true even if it didn't happen. Consider, for example, a story that every second grader in the country has heard, the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. As a young lad, George takes the axe to the tree in his father's front yard. When his father comes home and asks, "Who cut down my cherry tree?" George confesses, "I cannot tell a lie. I did it."

Historians know that this never happened. In fact, the Christian minister who propagated the story (known as "Parson Weems") later admitted to having made it up. Why then do we tell the story? For one thing, the story stresses one of the ultimate values that we claim as a country. We use the story to teach children that our country is rooted in integrity. Who was George Washington? He was the father of our nation. What kind of man was he? He was an honest man, a man of integrity! Really? How honest was he? Well, one time when he was a boy... The point of the story? This country is founded on honesty. It cannot tell a lie. In other words, the story serves as a piece of national propaganda. I'm reasonably sure, at least, that it's not a story told to schoolchildren in Tehran.

The account of George Washington and the cherry tree is told for at least one other reason as well, relating not so much to national image as to personal ethics. We tell this story to children because we want them to know that they should not lie under any circumstances. Even if they've done something bad, something harmful, they should not try to deceive others about it. It is better to come clean and deal with the consequences than to distort the truth and make things worse. So we tell the story, not because it really happened, but because in some sense we think it is true.

The stories about Jesus in the early church may have been similar. To be sure, many of them are accounts of things that really did happen (part of our task will be figuring out which ones did). Others are historical reminiscences that have been changed, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot, in the retelling. Others were made up by Christians, possibly well-intending Christians, at some point prior to the writing of the Gospels. But they all are meant to convey the truth, as the storyteller saw it, about Jesus.

A Piece of Evidence.

That stories about Jesus were changed (or made up) in the process of retelling is not just a wild idea dreamed up by university professors with too much time on their hands. In fact there is good evidence for it, evidence that can be found in the stories themselves as they have come down to us in the
Some More Information

Box 4.1 Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World

Nearly everyone we come in contact with can read and write on at least an elementary level; most can read the editorial page, for instance. Recent studies have shown, however, that things have not always been this way, that widespread literacy is a purely modern phenomenon. Preindustrial societies had neither the incentive nor the means to provide mass education in literacy for their children. They had no real incentive because the means of production didn’t require that everyone read, and they couldn’t afford the expense of providing the necessary training in any case. Such societies were far more dependent on the spoken word than the written.

Even ancient Greece and Rome were largely oral cultures, despite the unreflective assumption held even among some scholars that these societies, which produced so many literary classics, must have been largely literate. We now know that most people in the Greco-Roman world could not read, let alone write. Estimates of the level of literacy vary, but several important studies have concluded that in the best of times (e.g., Athens in the days of Socrates), only 10 to 15 percent of the population (the vast majority of them males) could read and write at an elementary level. Moreover, in this world even literary texts were oral phenomena: books were made to be read out loud, often in public, so that a person usually “read” a book by hearing it read by someone else.

Interestingly, even as these societies developed a dependence on texts—for example, by using written tax receipts, contracts, and wills—they did not promote literacy for the masses. Instead, those who were literate began to hire out their services to those who were not.

Until recently it has been commonly thought (again, even among scholars) that oral cultures could be counted on to preserve their traditions reliably, that people in such societies were diligent in remembering what they heard and could reproduce it accurately when asked about it. This, however, is another myth that has been exploded by recent studies of literacy. We have now come to see that people in oral cultures typically do not share the modern concern for preserving traditions intact, and do not repeat them exactly the same way every time. On the contrary, the concern for verbal accuracy has been instilled in us by the phenomenon of mass literacy itself; since anyone now can check to see if a fact has been remembered correctly (by looking it up), we have developed a sense that traditions ought to remain invariable and unchanged. In most oral societies, however, traditions are understood to be malleable; that is, they are supposed to be changed and made relevant to the new situations in which they are cited.

The importance of these new studies should be obvious as we begin to reflect on the fate of the traditions about Jesus as they spread by word of mouth throughout the largely illiterate Greco-Roman world.

Gospels. In numerous instances different Gospels tell the same story, but the stories differ in significant ways. Sometimes these differences represent simple shifts in emphasis. At other times, however, they represent irreconcilable conflicts. What is striking is that whether the changes are reconcilable or not, they often point to an attempt by some early Christian storyteller to convey an important idea about Jesus. Here we will look at just one example; dozens could easily be cited, all of them suggesting that many early Christians were willing to change a historical fact in order to make a theological point.
The illustration I have chosen concerns a small detail with profound implications—the day and time of Jesus' death, which are described differently in the Gospels. All four Gospels of the New Testament indicate that Jesus was crucified sometime during Passover week, in Jerusalem, on orders of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. But there is a key discrepancy in the accounts. To understand it, you will need some background information.

In the days of Jesus, Passover was the most important Jewish festival. It commemorated the exodus of the children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. The Hebrew Scriptures narrate the commemorative event itself (Exod 7–12). According to the ancient accounts, God raised up Moses to deliver his people and through him brought ten plagues on the land of Egypt to convince the Pharaoh to set his people free. The tenth plague was by far the worst: the death of every first-born human and animal in the land. In preparation for the onslaught, God instructed Moses to have every family of the Israelites sacrifice a lamb and spread its blood on the lintels and doorposts of their houses. In that way, when the angel of death came to bring destruction, he would see the blood on the doors of the Israelites and “pass over” them to go to the homes of the Egyptians.

The children of Israel were told to eat a quick meal in preparation for their escape. There was not time even to allow the bread to rise; they were therefore to eat it unleavened. The Israelites did as they were told; the angel of death came and went. The Pharaoh pleaded with the children of Israel to leave, they fled to the Red Sea, where they made their final escape through the parted waters.

The Israelites were instructed through Moses to commemorate this event annually. Hundreds of years later, in the days of Jesus, the Passover celebration brought large numbers of pilgrims to Jerusalem, where they would participate in sacrifices in the Temple and eat a sacred meal of symbolic foods, including a lamb, bitter herbs to recall their bitter hardship in Egypt, unleavened bread, and several cups of wine. The sequence of events was typically as follows. Lambs would be brought to the Temple, or purchased there, for sacrifice with the assistance of a priest. They would then be prepared for the Passover meal by being skinned, drained of their blood, and possibly butchered. Each person or family who brought a lamb would then take it home and prepare the meal. That evening was the Passover feast, which inaugurated the weeklong celebration called the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

As you may know, in Jewish reckoning, a new day begins when it gets dark (that is why the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday evening). So the lambs would be prepared for the Passover meal on the afternoon of the day before the meal would actually be eaten. When it got dark, the new day started, and the meal could begin.

This now takes us to the dating of Jesus' execution. The Gospel of Mark, probably our earliest account, clearly indicates when Jesus was put on trial. On the preceding day, according to Mark 14:3–12, the disciples ask Jesus where he would have them “prepare” the Passover. This is said to happen on the day when the priests “sacrifice the passover lamb,” or the day of Preparation for the Passover (the afternoon before the Passover meal). Jesus gives them their instructions and they make the preparations. That evening—the start of the next day for them—they celebrate the meal together (14:17–25).

At this special occasion, Jesus takes the symbolic foods of the meal and endows them with additional meaning, saying, “This is my body . . . this is my blood of the covenant” (14:22–24). Afterward, he goes with his disciples to (the Garden of) Gethsemane, where he is betrayed by Judas Iscariot and arrested (14:32, 43). He is immediately put on trial before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin (14:53). He spends the night in jail; early in the morning the Sanhedrin delivers him over to Pilate (15:1). After a short trial, Pilate condemns him to death. He is led off to be crucified, and is nailed to the cross at 9:00 a.m. (15:25). Thus, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is executed the day after the Preparation of the Passover, that is, on the morning after the Passover meal had been eaten.

Our latest canonical account of this event is in the Gospel of John. Many of the details here are similar to Mark: the same persons are involved and many of the same stories are told. There are differences, however, and some of these are significant. John's account of the trial before Pilate, for example, is much more elaborate (18:28–19:16). In part, this is because in his version the Jewish lead-
Chapter 4: The Traditions of Jesus in Their Greco-Roman Context

**SOMETHING-TO THINK ABOUT**

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<thead>
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<th>Box 4.2: Mark and John on the Time of Jesus’ Death</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MARK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Jewish Passover meal takes place on a Thursday evening.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jesus’ Last Supper is a Passover meal; it occurs on a Thursday, the evening after the Passover lambs are slaughtered.</td>
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<td>After the supper, Jesus is arrested. He spends the night in jail and is tried by Pilate in the morning.</td>
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<td>Jesus is crucified at 9:00 a.m., the morning after the Passover meal was eaten.</td>
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...this is symbol with additional... Afterward, of Gethsemane and the trial (14:53); the next day (3:1); After 11. He is led off to Pilate at 9:00 a.m., Jesus is if the Passover meal is in some cases solved and are different... (for example 19:16). In Mark, the leaders refuse to enter Pilate’s place of residence and send Jesus in to face Pilate alone. As a result, Pilate has to conduct the trial by going back and forth between the prosecution and the defendant, engaging in relatively lengthy conversations with both before pronouncing his verdict. What is particularly striking, and significant for our investigation here, is that we are told exactly when the trial comes to an end with Pilate’s verdict: “Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover, and it was about 12:00 noon” (John 19:14). Jesus is immediately sent off to be crucified (19:16).

The day of Preparation for the Passover? How could this be? That is the day before the Passover meal was eaten, the day the priests began to sacrifice the lambs at noon. But in Mark, Jesus had his disciples prepare the Passover on that day, and then he ate the meal with them in the evening after it became dark, only to be arrested afterward.

If you read John’s account carefully, you will notice other indications that Jesus is said to be executed on a different day than he is in Mark. John 18:28, for example, gives the reason that the Jewish leaders refuse to enter into Pilate’s place of residence for Jesus’ trial. It is because they do not want to become ritually defiled, and thereby prevented from eating the Passover meal that evening (recall, according to Mark, they had already eaten the meal the night before!). This difference in dating explains another interesting feature of John’s Gospel. In this account Jesus never instructs his disciples to prepare for the Passover, and he evidently does not eat a Passover meal during his last evening with them (he does not, for example, take the symbolic foods and say, “This is my body” and “This is my blood”). The reason for these differences should be now clear: in John’s Gospel, Jesus was already in his tomb by the time of this meal.

We seem to be left with a difference that is difficult to reconcile. Both Mark and John indicate the day and hour of Jesus’ death, but they disagree. In John’s account, he is executed sometime after
noon on the day on which preparations were being made to eat the Passover meal. In Mark's account he is killed the following day, the morning after the passover meal had been eaten, sometime around 9:00 a.m. If we grant that there is a difference, how do we explain it?

Some scholars have argued that John's account is more accurate historically, since it coincides better with Jewish sources that describe how criminal trials were to be conducted by the Sanhedrin. If these scholars are right, then Mark or one of his sources may have changed the day on which Jesus was killed in order to promote the idea that Jesus himself had instituted the Lord's Supper during the Passover meal. This is possible, but may not be the best explanation. The Jewish sources that describe the procedures of the Sanhedrin were written nearly 200 years after this event, and thus are probably not our best guide.

If we concede that the later account (John's) is on general principle less likely to be accurate, since so many more years and so many more storytellers would have intervened between the account and the events it narrates, an intriguing possibility arises to explain why John, or his source, may have changed the detail concerning Jesus' death. John is the only Gospel in which Jesus is actually identified as "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Indeed, he is called this at the very start of the Gospel, by his forerunner, John the Baptist (1:29; cf. 1:36). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' death represents the Salvation of God, just as the sacrifice of the lamb represented salvation for the ancient Israelites during the first Passover. Perhaps John (or his source) made a change in the day and hour of Jesus' death precisely to reinforce this theological point. In this Gospel, Jesus dies on the same day as the Passover lamb, at the same hour (just after noon)—to show that Jesus really is the lamb of God.

**Conclusion: The Early Traditions about Jesus**

This analysis gives just one example of how historical facts may have been changed to convey theological "truths." We could easily examine other examples pertaining to such key events in the Gospels as Jesus' birth, his baptism, his miracles, his teachings, and his resurrection. The main point is that the stories that Christians told and retold about Jesus were not meant to be objective history lessons for students interested in key events of Roman imperial times. They were meant to convince people that Jesus was the miracle-working Son of God whose death brought salvation to the world and to edify and instruct those who already believed. Sometimes the stories were modified to express a theological truth. For the early Christians who passed along the stories we now have in the Gospels, it was sometimes legitimate and necessary to change a historical fact in order to make a theological point. Moreover, these are the stories that the Gospel writers inherited.

This conclusion has some profound implications for our investigation of the Gospels. The first concerns the Gospels as pieces of early Christian literature. Just as the Gospel writers inherited stories that try to make a point, they themselves have attempted to produce coherent accounts of Jesus' life and death to make certain points. Each Gospel author may have had his own points to make, and these may not have been the same in every case. Mark's point may not have been John's point in his story of Jesus' crucifixion. It is important then—indeed, absolutely crucial—that we allow each author to have his own say, rather than assume that they are all trying to say the same thing. We need to study each account for its own emphases.

The second implication concerns the Gospels as historical sources for what happened during the life of Jesus. If the Gospels have differences in historical detail, and each Gospel preserves traditions that have been changed, then it is impossible for the historian simply to take these stories at face value and uncritically assume that they provide historically accurate information. We will therefore need to develop some criteria for deciding which features of the Gospels represent Christianizations of the tradition and which represent the life of Jesus as it can be historically reconstructed.

Over the course of the next several chapters we will devote our attention to the first aspect of our study, the literary emphasis of each Gospel. Once we understand in greater detail where the Gospels came from and what each one has to say, we will then be equipped to address the second issue, asking broader historical questions in an attempt to establish what actually happened in the life of Jesus.
THE GOSPELS AS BIOGRAPHIES OF JESUS

Now that we know where the Gospel writers got their stories about Jesus, what can we say about the books they wrote? What kind of writings are they?

Scholars have come to recognize that the Gospels are not completely unlike other kinds of literature from the Greco-Roman world, but are like ancient biographies of other important people. This does not mean that the Gospels are like modern biographies. Modern biographies are usually based on extensive research and archival work by their authors, who examine hundreds of sources to put together an accurate chronological sketch of a person's life and who are interested particularly in providing explanations of why they said and acted the way they did (often explaining their personality traits on the basis of the formative influences on their early lives).

But ancient biographies were different. There were not as many sources to consult, as a rule, and no "data retrieval systems" to assist authors in compiling data. Ancient biographies were, to be sure, usually based on oral and written sources. But unlike modern biographers, ancient ones often showed a preference for the oral (since unlike written sources, oral ones can be questioned!). Moreover, ancient biographies were less concerned with relating historical events than with showing the character of the main figure through his or her words, deeds, and interactions.

Perhaps most important, ancient biographies did not try to show how a person's character developed over time, because most ancient people believed that a person's character was relatively constant through his or her life. Instead, ancient biographies showed how a person's character was manifest in his or her daily life—starting from childhood. Since personality traits were thought of as constant, an ancient biography would often portray the main figure's character at the very outset of the narrative.

Knowing this about ancient biographies is useful, because if the Gospels are that kind of writing, we can expect them to share these same features: the Gospels then will be narrative descriptions of what Jesus said and did, based on oral and written sources. In them Jesus' character will be portrayed as constant throughout his life; and one does not need to wait long to find out what that character is. It will be evident at the very outset of the narrative.

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AT A GLANCE

Box 4.3 The Traditions of Jesus

1. Jesus died around 30 C.E.; the Gospels were written thirty-five to sixty-five years later, between 65 and 95 C.E.

2. The authors of the New Testament Gospels are anonymous; they did not claim to be eyewitnesses to the events they narrate.

3. The authors of the Gospels inherited their accounts of Jesus from oral traditions that had been in circulation during the intervening decades.

4. Stories passed on by word of mouth tend to change over time, sometimes significantly.

5. There is evidence that the Gospels contain stories changed in the long process of retelling, for example, when different Gospels tell the same story in different, even irreconcilable, ways.

6. From a literary perspective, each account should thus be studied on its own terms. We should not assume that all the accounts have the same message.
7. Moreover, from a historical perspective, differences in our sources require us to devise methods for determining what really happened in the life of Jesus.

8. The Gospels are ancient biographies of Jesus.

9. As such, they are based on several oral and written sources, which were used to provide chronological accounts of Jesus' life that portrayed his personal character, starting with the opening scenes of the narrative.

SOME ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS: THE AUTHORS OF THE GOSPELS

Proto-orthodox Christians of the second century, some decades after most of the New Testament books had been written, claimed that their favorite Gospels had been penned by two of Jesus' disciples—Matthew, the tax collector, and John, the beloved disciple—and by two friends of the apostles—Mark, the secretary of Peter, and Luke, the traveling companion of Paul. Scholars today, however, find it difficult to accept this tradition for several reasons.

First of all, none of these Gospels makes any such claim about itself. All four authors chose to keep their identities anonymous. Would they have done so if they had been eyewitnesses? This certainly would have been possible, but one would at least have expected an eyewitness or a friend of an eyewitness to authenticate his account by appealing to personal knowledge, for example, by narrating the stories in the first person singular ("On the day that Jesus and I went up to Jerusalem...").

Moreover, we know something about the backgrounds of the people who accompanied Jesus during most of his ministry. The disciples appear to have been uneducated peasants from Galilee. Both Simon Peter and John the son of Zebedee, for example, are said to have been peasant fishermen (Mark 1:16–20) who were "uneducated," that is, literally, unable to read and write (Acts 4:13). Now it is true that the Gospels do not represent the most elegant literature from antiquity, but their authors were at least relatively well educated; they write, for the most part, correct Greek. Could two of them have been disciples?

Again, it is possible. Jesus and his apostles, however, appear to have spoken Aramaic, the common language of the Jews in Palestine. Whether they could also have spoken Greek as a second language is something that scholars have long debated, but at the very least it is clear that Greek was not their native tongue. The authors of the Gospels, on the other hand, are absolutely fluent in Greek. Did the apostles go back to school after Jesus died, overcome years of illiteracy by learning how to read and write at a relatively high level, become skilled in foreign composition, and then later pen the Gospels? Most scholars consider it somewhat unlikely.

Perhaps an even more important aspect of the authorship of the Gospels is the evidence that they appear to preserve stories that were in circulation for a long period. This observation certainly applies to narratives for which no eyewitnesses were evidently present. For example, if Pilate and Jesus were alone at the trial in John 18:28–19:16, and Jesus was immediately executed, who told the Fourth Evangelist what Jesus actually said? An early Christian must have come up with words that seemed appropriate to the occasion. The same principle applies to the other accounts of the Gospels as well. All of them appear to have circulated by word of mouth among Christian converts throughout the Mediterranean world.

One of our four authors, Luke, explicitly tells us that he used oral and written sources for his narrative (Luke 1:1–4), and he claims that some of these sources were drawn ultimately from eyewitnesses. This circumstance raises another interesting question. Is it likely that authors who extensively used earlier sources for their accounts were themselves eyewitnesses? Suppose, for example, that Matthew actually was a disciple who accompanied Jesus and witnessed the things he said and did. Why then would he take almost all of his stories, sometimes word for word, from another written account (as we will see in Chapter 5)?

In short, it appears that the Gospels have inherited traditions from both written and oral sources, as Luke himself acknowledges, and that these sources drew from traditions that had been circulating for years, decades even, among Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world.
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


Dibelius, Martin. *From Tradition to Gospel*. Trans. B. L. Woolf. New York: Scribner, 1934. This groundbreaking study deals with the character of the traditions about Jesus in circulation orally prior to being written down in the Gospels.

Gerhardsson, Birger. *Manuscripts and Memory: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*. Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1961. One of the most influential studies to maintain, contrary to the present chapter, that the traditions about Jesus in the New Testament Gospels were not changed, for the most part, in the process of being retold; for advanced students.

Harris, William V. *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989. A brilliant analysis by a major classicist who seeks to determine how many people could read and write in the ancient world and what their reasons were for doing so; for advanced students.

McKnight, Edgar V. *What Is Form Criticism?* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969. A basic introduction to the study of how oral traditions about Jesus were modified and formed prior to the writing of the Gospels.

Macmullen, Ramsey. *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1984. A concise and insightful account of the spread of Christianity through the Roman world, including discussion on how Christians engaged in their mission and the reasons for their success.

Ong, W. J. *Orality and Literacy*. London: Routledge, 1982. An intriguing discussion of the social and psychological differences between oral and written cultures (between cultures in which traditions are typically heard and those in which they are typically read); for more advanced students.

KEY TERMS

Biography, Greco-Roman Gospels Passover

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND REFLECTION

1. What does it mean to speak about the "oral traditions" behind the Gospels?
2. What important events happened between the time of Jesus' death and the writing of the New Testament Gospels? In what contexts did people tell stories about what Jesus said and did? Who would be telling these stories? What might they emphasize in the stories as they told them?
3. Does it seem possible to you that some of the stories about Jesus were modified as they were told and retold? Why would they have been? What kind of changes might have been made?
4. Is there any evidence that the stories recorded in our Gospels are ones that had been changed in the process of retelling? How convincing is this evidence to you? What other kinds of evidence would you look for?
5. Why do scholars question the traditional view that our four New Testament Gospels were written by persons named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?
6. What are the chief characteristics of Greco-Roman "biography" as a genre?
7. In what ways are the Gospels like Greco-Roman biographies? Why would understanding the Gospels as Greco-Roman biographies help us to interpret them?