Echoes of Jesus

Does the New Testament Reflect What He Said?

Second Edition

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Introduction

Can we hear echoes of Jesus' words when we read the New Testament?

Many questions arise when looking at the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as found in the New Testament. The importance of these questions is evident by the fact that there are few issues more emotive than whether this part of the Bible contains a real and accurate description of Jesus. This is partly because of two reasons. Firstly, individual people and governments around the world use, or have used, the Bible as their foundation for deciding what is right and what is wrong. Secondly, hundreds of millions of men, women and children understand the Bible as being God's ultimate revelation of himself to us, describing how God became human flesh and dwelt among people in the person of Jesus Christ. It is this same Jesus that they believe offers them forgiveness and a relationship whereby he indwells them and becomes their friend and master.

How scholars view the reliability of the New Testament

Despite the importance of these Biblical passages about Jesus to so many people, I have met many who believe that no intelligent person would spend time considering the life and teachings of Jesus. Often this is because they are convinced that the biblical records about Jesus merely represent a collection of folk tales. To them the New Testament accounts about Jesus represent fanciful stories that have been so entwined with reality that it is impossible to discern anything

but a small remnant of historical truth about what Jesus actually said and did.

On the other hand, I have found that there have been extraordinarily brilliant individuals who have discovered that Jesus' life was at least very fascinating, even though they appear to have never given their allegiance to him. One of the most famous scientists of the 20th century was greatly impressed by the figure of Jesus Christ. Although he did not profess to be a Christian, the Nobel Prize–winning physicist Albert Einstein made the following comments in an interview in 1929:

> *As a child I received instruction in the Bible and the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene [Jesus] … Jesus is too colossal for the pen of phrasemongers, however artful …*[1]

When asked if he accepted the historical existence of Jesus, he replied:

> *Unquestionably. No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life … legendary heroes of antiquity … lack the authentic vitality of Jesus.*[2]

When such a great genius of physics as Einstein speaks so favourably about the accounts of Jesus found in the Gospels of the New Testament, it should at least encourage us to read them and decide for ourselves just how colossal is Jesus. Einstein did, like all of us, have a bias about the existence of God, and so his belief in a 'spirit vastly superior to man'[3] may have predisposed him to arrive at his conclusions about Jesus. However, it should be kept in mind that Einstein began life

1 GS Viereck, 'What life means to Einstein: an interview by George Sylvester Viereck', *Saturday Evening Post,* 26 October 1929, pp. 17, 110, 113, 114 & 117.

2 GS Viereck, pp. 17, 110, 113, 114 & 117.

3 H Dukas & B Hoffman (eds), *Albert Einstein the Human Side*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981. At least at one point in his life, Einstein did not believe in a personal God. This view is based on a *New York Times* magazine article from 1930, according to the same book. At the present time, a variety of scientists are publishing popular books on theological issues, often denouncing the existence of God.

as a practising Jew (a religion that does not regard Jesus as God the Son) nor did he believe in a personal God. The thought did also occur to me that Einstein's judgment about Jesus may be regarded as inconsequential insofar as inspiring us to read the New Testament given he was a specialist in physics and not in history or theology. The flipside of this concern is that if an intelligent person who is not a specialist in history, nor a Christian, could conclude that the Gospels present a reliable account about Jesus, then maybe one does not need to be a rocket scientist to reach a similar conclusion.

Of course it is not only brilliant scientists who consider that the Gospels contain valuable information about Jesus. There are scholars of history and ancient literature who have also concluded that the Bible provides a reliable account about Jesus. I have selected quotations from two such scholars; the first is from another secular scholar and the second from a Christian.

Will Durant, a philosopher and Pulitzer Prize–winning writer of history, wrote:

> *Despite the prejudices and theological preconceptions of the evangelists [who wrote the Gospels], they record many incidents that many inventors would have concealed. No one reading these scenes can doubt the reality of the figure [Jesus] behind them. That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels. After two centuries of Higher Criticism [attacking the authenticity and veracity of the Bible] the outlines of the life, character, and teaching of Christ, remain reasonably clear, and constitute the most fascinating feature in the history of Western man.*[4]

4 W Durant, 'Caesar and Christ: a history of the Roman civilization and of Christianity from beginnings to A.D. 325', in *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 3, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1944, p. 557. It should be kept in mind that Durant referred to himself as an agnostic and was critical of belief in a supernatural God. He also believed that the Gospels were not a perfect record of Jesus' life. For example he stated that 'there are many contradictions between one gospel and another… [However the] contradictions are of minutiae, not substance; in essentials the synoptic gospels agree remarkably well', p. 557.

Professor Edwin Yamauchi, who has received masters and doctoral degrees in Mediterranean studies, stated in an interview that:

> *… my studies have greatly strengthened and enriched my spiritual life … This doesn't mean that I don't recognize that there are some issues that still remain; within this lifetime we will not have full knowledge. But these issues don't even begin to undermine my faith in the essential trustworthiness of the New Testament … For me, the historical evidence has reinforced my commitment to Jesus Christ as the Son of God who loves us and died for us and was raised from the dead.*[5]

But what does the evidence say?

However, the decision of whether or not to investigate the life of Jesus should not be based solely on the testimonies of several scholars. One reason for this is that it is easy to find scholars who have quite different opinions about the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament accounts. For example, one scholar wrote that even Jesus' birth town (Bethlehem) had been deliberately reassigned from the real place of birth, so as to make Jesus appear very significant in the eyes of the Jews.[6]

Because of this divergence of scholarly opinion, I wanted to embark on a study of the actual evidence for the reliability of the New Testament. This is based on the concept that it is not so much opinions that matter, but the foundations for these opinions. The evidence that I was particularly interested in related to three broad questions that are commonly asked:

1. The New Testament was written hundreds of years ago, so it had to be copied by hand, over and over again, until the printing press was invented in the 1400s. Has all this repeated copying caused many changes in the message of the New Testament and, if so, how much has it changed? If there were changes, were they all accidentally made by copyists or were some intentional?

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5 L Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus,* Zondervan, Michigan, US, 1988, p.119. Prof. Yamauchi has published 80 articles in 37 scholarly journals.

6 BD Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them),* HarperCollins e-books, 2009, pp. 235–6.

2. Were the people who wrote the New Testament reliable and honest? Because these authors were biased towards Jesus, has their bias twisted the original story?

3. Given that Jesus did not write down his teachings, how accurate are the recordings by his disciples? Was not reading and writing 2000 years ago the preserve of only an elite few?

Parts of this book

My investigative journey took a path involving several successive stages, which are discussed in parts I to IV. The book then finishes with a look at the implications of the discoveries made along the way, followed by three appendices. The following is a brief outline of the book.

Part I: Literacy and gullibility in the world of Jesus

This part consists of four chapters that explore several related beliefs that I have encountered frequently. The first is that people who lived around the time of Jesus were unable to write accurate history and that as a consequence the small amount of literature that was produced is probably very inaccurate. The second belief is that literacy was rare among the people. This illiteracy created an environment conducive to people being easily duped, which in turn aided the spread of Christianity.

In chapter 1, I will demonstrate that there existed people, during and before the time of Jesus, who were able to write reliable historical records. Chapter 2 will look at how widespread literacy was in the Greco–Roman Empire. This geographical consideration is important as it was from the province of Judea that Christianity grew. Chapter 3 will seek to uncover evidence for literacy amongst the Judean inhabitants specifically, as these are the people with which Jesus shared his life the most. It will also examine the literacy of the early Christian community. Finally, chapter 4 will examine the relationship between illiteracy and gullibility.

Part II: From Jesus' mouth to the disciples' hands

This explores in three chapters whether it was possible for Jesus' actions and teachings to be recorded accurately by the early disciples. It analyses the idea that the disciples casually followed Jesus around the countryside and tried to recall what he said and what he did only after

he had died. With these half-hearted remembrances, they then began to travel the highways and byways spreading their stories.

In chapter 5 I will examine the likelihood that Jesus was a teacher who was diligent in teaching his disciples, and that they in turn were equally dedicated to preserving what he said and did.

Chapter 6 will illustrate how Jesus taught using various techniques that would have greatly aided the accurate retention of all that he said. It will also look at why it is that sometimes the same account, when described in more than one Gospel, has variations.

Chapter 7 will explore the historical evidence that two of Jesus' disciples (Matthew and John) did actually write the Gospel accounts named after them, and that the other two Gospels were written by those associated with the first apostles.

Part III: Accuracy in the copying of the New Testament accounts

Unfortunately, the original handwritten books and letters of the New Testament no longer exist. However, copies were made before they disintegrated, and as the centuries passed, copies of these copies were also made. This process of making copies of copies has resulted in changes to the original wording. The extent and impact of these changes are explored in this part. Chapter 8 examines the oldest complete, and incomplete, copies of the New Testament. Chapter 9 looks closely at the accuracy of copying by comparing several ancient important copies made in the 200s and 300s AD, while chapter 10 explores ways of comparing many ancient copies. The impact of three portions of the New Testament that have been copied differently in the early centuries AD is studied in chapter 11. Chapter 12 looks at how different the Christian message would be if our New Testament was solely based on one particular ancient copy that is considered by many scholars to be very different and inferior to other highly regarded copies.

Part IV: Evidence from early Christian and non-Christian witnesses

Because the oldest significant portions of the New Testament are dated later than 200 AD, it is important to establish whether the New

Testament was copied accurately before this time. One way to explore this matter is to compare the teachings of Christian leaders who wrote before 200 AD with the teachings of the New Testament. Another way is to delve into the writings of non-Christians who also wrote before 200 AD and commented on Christian beliefs. The comments of these non-Christians can also be used to determine if the bias of the authors of the New Testament had a negative impact on their truthfulness. Who these non-Christian authors were, why they commented on Jesus and the Christians, and what they had to say is one of the main focuses of this part.

Chapter 13 compares Christian teachings found in a letter composed by the Christian leader Polycarp with statements found in the New Testament. It also considers the work of two non-Christian historians — Tacitus and Thallus. The credibility and writings of three more authors from the ancient world — Lucian, Pliny and Josephus — are examined over chapters 14 to 18.

Implications and the appendices

The final chapter outlines the implications of the New Testament being reliable for those who have non-Christian beliefs, including agnostics and Muslims.

I have also composed three appendices, the first of which provides a brief background of political and religious life in first-century Judea. The second appendix consists of a table showing points of agreement between the New Testament and the non-Christian writers mentioned in part IV. Appendix 3 considers claims that the town named in the New Testament as being Jesus' home town did not exist during his lifetime.

I hope that those who finish reading this book will see that it is reasonable to conclude, based on an understanding of historical evidence, that the New Testament accounts of Jesus and the first Christians are trustworthy and vitally important.

3

Literacy in Jesus' world

The previous chapter has shown how extensive literacy was in the Greco–Roman world. It's time to focus on Judea and the surrounding countries where Jesus lived and taught. Are they likely to be more or less literate than their neighbours? As Jesus and many of his first followers were Jews, it's necessary to examine literacy within the Jewish society, particularly those living in and around Judea and Galilee, as well as within the fledgling Christian community.

When speaking of the Jewish society in Judea and Galilee during Roman occupation, I don't mean to imply that this society lived in total isolation and wasn't influenced by the cultures surrounding it. In fact, Jerusalem was a centre of Greek language learning in the first century AD,[1] and many Jews in the region knew the Greek language.[2] Jesus may well have been one of those who could speak Greek as well as the other common language of Aramaic.[3] Cities that were dominated by Greeks, such as Caesarea Maritima and Scythopolis, still had large

1 G Mussies, 'Greek in Palestine and the Diaspora', in S Safrai & M Stern (eds), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, vol. 2, Van Gorcum & Comp., BV, Assen, The Netherlands, 1976, p. 1054.

2 G Mussies, p. 1056.

3 G Mussies, p. 1056. See also A Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, UK, 2001, pp. 140–7.

Jewish minorities.[4] Many Jews had Greek names,[5] including two of Jesus' closest disciples (Andrew and Philip). The first Christian church in Jerusalem included Jews so greatly influenced by Greek culture that they were called Grecian Jews (Acts 6:1).[6] Nevertheless, it is important to examine the Jewish society as a separate group in order to confirm its levels of literacy. If they had a significant degree of literacy, then this makes it more likely that they had a reasonable understanding of the normal ways in which the world worked. Such an understanding would imply that many of those who converted to Christianity did so only after weighing the evidence in a rational manner. After exploring this aspect of Jewish literacy, I will turn to considering whether the early Christian community as a whole, irrespective of what they were before their conversion, has left indications of their level of literacy.

Reading and writing in Jewish society

I will use five different angles to gain an insight into Jewish literacy: the teaching of reading and writing to Jewish children and adults and the importance of literacy in religious practices, the profession of the scribe, the conclusions we can draw from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the advanced literacy required to produce the huge number of business documents unearthed, and the prevalence of graffiti.

Reading and writing as part of Jewish expectations and practices

At least as early as the first century AD, the majority of Jewish children received an education at schools. Josephus, a famous Jewish historian and general, records that Jews were taught to bring 'children up in

4 G Mussies, pp. 1058–9.

5 S Safrai & M Stern (eds), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, vol. 1, Van Gorcum & Comp., BV, Assen, The Netherlands, 1974, p. 256.

6 The text in Acts is often translated as Hellenistic Jews. This is because Greeks in general were often referred to as Hellenes, being named after Hellen, who was the legendary father of the Greeks.

learning and to exercise them in the laws'.[7] Before its destruction in 70 AD, Jerusalem alone had 480 synagogues, each with a 'house of learning'. Even in a small village such as Nazareth, the local synagogue had a sacred scroll that was read aloud (Luke 4:16–20). If a town didn't employ a teacher of the written law, it was regarded as a sin that would lead to the town's destruction.[8] In these synagogue-based schools Jewish children were taught the alphabet and how to read seven days a week.[9]

Compared to reading, the ability to write well was less widespread as it was a professional skill taught separately.[10] However, a certain proficiency at writing was still quite common. Many adult Jews continued in regular study and many would write various holy scriptures onto their doors, gates, arms and foreheads.[11] Being able to write at a basic level was such a fundamental aspect of being a Jew that one famous Jewish scholar required one convert to Judaism to learn to write the first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet.[12] The Jews even had laws on who was responsible for mistakes when a child was being taught to write scripture. If the child was holding the pen while the adult was guiding his hand, then the child was held liable.[13]

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7 Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.204. James Dunn notes that Josephus referred to the children here as being 'taught to read (learn their letters, *grammata paideuein*)', in JDG Dunn, 'Did Jesus attend the synagogue', p. 221, in JH Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and Archeology*, William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Cambridge, UK, 2006, pp. 206–22.

8 S Safrai, 'Education and the study of the Torah', in S Safrai & M Stern (eds), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions,* vol. 2, Van Gorcum & Comp., BV, Assen, The Netherlands, 1976, p. 950.

9 S Safrai, 'Education and the study of the Torah', pp. 947, 954.

10 S Safrai, 'Education and the study of the Torah', p. 952.

11 EP Sanders, *Judaism: Practices and Belief: 63 BCE – 66 CE*, SCM Press, London, 1992, pp. 196–7. Sanders was Arts and Sciences Professor of Religion at Duke University, North Carolina, from 1990 to 2005.

12 Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Shabbath, Folia 31a, https://halakhah.com/shabbath/shabbath_31.html, accessed 05/12/2018. The famous Jewish scholar, Hillel, was a prominent Jewish teacher from about 30 BC to 10 AD.

13 J Neusner, *Judaisms' Story of Creation: Scripture, Halakhah, Aggadah*, Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, p. 62.

Jews were also well acquainted with the value of writing as a means to help memorisation. The Jewish philosopher Philo (c. 20 BC – 50 AD) wrote that:

> *while a man is reading, the notions of what he is reading fleet away, being carried off by the rapidity of his utterance; but if he is writing they are stamped upon his heart at leisure, and they take up their abode in the heart of each individual as his mind dwells upon each particular …*[14]

That large numbers of Jews could read is also apparent from practices conducted in the ancient synagogues. Synagogues were meeting places that had a vital role in the community, and in Jesus' time they existed in large numbers throughout Israel. Jewish adults and children would meet at least every Sabbath to listen to readings from the scriptures. The privilege to read to the gathering was not restricted to a handful of specialists, as various people were invited to do so. Ideally, seven individuals would be asked to perform the Sabbath day's readings.[15]

Scribes

Jewish priests and those belonging to the tribe of Levi were often scribes. Scribes carried out activities such as making copies of texts, composing legal documents and acting as experts in interpreting the law.[16] One professor noted:

> *The ancient world required scribes in vast numbers ... We shall not be able to arrive at definite numbers, but we may assume that there were some thousands of scribes in Jewish Palestine in our period [63 BC to 66 AD]: legal advisors in each locality, people who could draft documents, and legal experts and copyists in the employ of the temple. At the time of Herod, according to Josephus,*

14 Philo of Alexandria, *The Special Laws, IV*, XXXII, (160), www.earlychristian writings.com/yonge/book30.html, accessed 01/12/2018.

15 S Safrai, 'The synagogue', in S Safrai & M Stern (eds), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions,* vol. 2, Van Gorcum & Comp., BV, Assen, The Netherlands, 1976, pp. 908, 909, 915, 929, 930.

16 EP Sanders, pp.170–1.

> *there were about 6,000 Pharisees.*[17] *We have seen that there were 18,000 to 20,000 priests and Levites ... [It is likely] that many ordinary priests and many of the Levites put their learning to good use and served as scribes and legal experts.*[18]

One particular Jewish priest called Zechariah is described as writing a short sentence shortly before Jesus' birth (Luke 1:5, 63). He had to communicate using writing as he had been mute for several months. Although people expressed surprise at *what* he wrote, none were surprised that Zechariah *could* write.

Dead Sea Scrolls

Further evidence of Jewish literacy comes from the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, which were written in the years between 200 BC and 68 AD. They were found scattered among 11 different caves between the years 1947 and 1956. The remains of over 800 scrolls have been found, and although the vast majority are written in Hebrew, some are in Greek and Aramaic.[19] About 200 of these scrolls are copies, or parts of copies, of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament portion of the Christian Bible); another 200 or so relate to the community that wrote them; and the remaining scrolls consist of other Jewish literature. Some of the books within the Hebrew Bible were so popular that multiple copies of their scrolls were made. So far scholars have discovered 26 copies of Deuteronomy, 36 copies of Psalms, and 21 copies of Isaiah.[20] One of the scrolls found is titled the *Manual of Discipline*. This states: 'The general members of

17 Pharisees were a respected Jewish religious group, who aimed at a level of purity above the ordinary. Although only some were priests, all were scholars and experts in the law. EP Sanders, p. 26.

18 EP Sanders, pp. 179, 181–2.

19 PR Davies, GJ Brooke & PR Callaway, *The Complete World of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2002, p. 7.

20 PR Davies, GJ Brooke & PR Callaway, p. 77; E Tov, 'The text of Isaiah at Qumran', in CC Broyles & CA Evans (eds), *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, vol. 2, Brill, New York, 1997, p. 491.

the community are to keep awake for a third of all the nights of the year reading book(s), studying the Law and worshipping together'.[21]

Many scholars believe that the people who produced this wealth of literature were a religious offshoot of Judaism called the Essenes. The Essenes worked and moved outside of their main headquarters, thus influencing others. Their membership was certainly not confined to the wealthier segments of the general Jewish society.

Documentation everywhere

Anyone involved in business transactions knows the importance of keeping records. It is highly likely that a dispute will arise if there has been inadequate documentation. This same principle was part and parcel of daily life in the ancient world. Such administrative concerns required more than the basic ability to read and write a name and a date. This type of advanced literacy amongst the Jews was prominent even outside of the major cities, as 'even in a backwater town legal paperwork flourished ...' complete with necessary clerks and copyists.[22] An example comes from the discovery of the Cave of Letters, located in the valley of the Hever brook (Nahal Hever in Hebrew) near the Dead Sea. The contents of the cave included archives from residents of the town of Ein Gedi. One of the archives included: 'thirty-five documents, mostly legal, belonging to a woman called Babata',[23] who lived in the cave along with dozens of children. The documents ranged in date from 93 to 132 AD and reflect how Roman, Jewish and Nabatean[24] laws impacted on this Jewish woman's estate.

21 Cited by LB Yaghjian, 'Ancient reading' in R Rohrbaugh (ed.), *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, US, 1996, p. 221. This copy of the Manual of Discipline is referred to as 1QS 6:7–8. The Manual of Discipline is also called the Rules scroll (PR Davies, GJ Brooke & PR Callaway, p. 82).

22 EP Sanders, pp.179–80. See also Yigael Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome*, Random House, New York, 1971, chapter 16.

23 EP Sanders, p. 179.

24 Nabataea was a region at the southern end of the Dead Sea and became part of the Roman province of Arabia. Nabataeans obtained significant wealth as traders, with routes between Petra in Jordan and Sinai in Egypt. K Gutwein, 'Uncovering Subeita', in *Archaeological Diggings*, 15(3), 2008, pp. 50–3.

They are written in Greek, Nabatean and Aramaic, with handwriting skills varying from excellent to poor.[25] Many of these official documents were duplicates, indicated by words such as the following written on them: 'Verified exact copy of one item from the minutes of the council of Petra the metropolis, minutes displayed in the temple of Aphrodite in Petra…'[26]

When the remains of documents from all of the caves along the Hever brook were examined, there were over 60 written in Aramaic or Hebrew alone. About half of these documents are deeds of sale and the remainder are receipts, accounts and the like.[27] The writing was carried out by a large number of people, at least some of whom were not professional scribes.[28] Some of the deeds of sale have signatures belonging to the purchaser and the seller, as well as up to five signatures from witnesses.[29]

One place that speaks much about literacy in the first century AD is Masada, the famous fortress that included Herod the Great's palace. The ruins lie to the south of the Hever brook and include a surprising amount of written material. The salvaged papyrus texts were written before 74 AD, while those writings inscribed on ostraca were written between 66 and 74 AD. The documents are in a variety of languages, including 123 in Jewish script (either Hebrew or Aramaic), 29 in Greek, 21 in Latin, and even six bilingual texts. Some of the content is mundane, such as a letter in Greek from one brother to another about the delivery of lettuce. A detailed assessment concluded that some of the material was composed by non-professional bilinguals who not only had listening and reading comprehension in two languages,

25 B Isaac, *The Near East Under Roman Rule: Selected papers*, Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1998, p. 160.

26 B Isaac, p. 164.

27 HM Cotton & A Yardeni, *Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek Documentary Texts from Nahal Hever and Other Sites: With an Appendix Containing Alleged Qumran Texts*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 9.

28 HM Cotton & A Yardeni, p. 9.

29 HM Cotton & A Yardeni, p. 17.

but could speak and write in both languages (so-called type 1 productive bilinguals).[30]

Other people groups in Judea and Galilee have left behind remarkable evidence of being literate societies. In a town called Kadesh, only some 32 kilometres from Capernaum, in the region of Upper Galilee, an archive room was discovered in 1999.[31] The room, which was part of an administrative building about 1800 square metres in size, had been destroyed by fire.[32] Inside were about 1800 clay bullae, which were blobs of clay used to seal and identify papyrus documents of an official nature. These bullae were in use in about 150 BC. The fire baked and preserved the clay seals but destroyed the documents. The bullae indicate that the documents mostly pertained to Greco–Roman, and to a much lesser extent Phoenician, cultures. The archaeologists who made the discovery were excavating what they believed was only a small agriculturally based village and/or a garrison, given the very limited references in historical literature of that period.[33] Therefore even in towns with almost no known significance as far as historical references are concerned, evidence exists that numerous people were able to read and write. As an aside, in the city of Seleucia, located in present-day Iraq, a total of 24,000 clay bullae were discovered from the Hellenistic period (about 323–146 BC)![34]

The farmers' need for literacy

Another archaeological discovery indicating the widespread nature of literacy is that of ostraca from the region of Idumea, lying on the

30 SD Charlesworth, 'Recognizing Greek literacy in early Roman documents from the Judaean desert', *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*, 2014, 51, pp. 161–89. One hundred and nine of the texts were written on papyrus. Apart from the ostraca texts mentioned above, another 450 ostraca were found with small amounts of text, all dating between 66 and 74 AD.

31 PM Head, 'A further note on', *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus Evangelical Quarterly*, 75(4), 2003, pp. 343–5.

32 H Watzman, 'Phoenician resilience', *Archaeology*, 53(6), 2000, www.archaeology.org/0011/newsbriefs/phoenician.html, accessed 01/12/2018.

33 S Herbert & A Berlin, 'Tel Kadesh, 1997–1999', *Israel Archaeological Journal*, 50, 2000, p. 118–23, cited by PM Head, pp. 343–5.

34 A Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, UK, 2001, p. 41.

southern border of Judea. These ostraca — typically broken bits of pottery used to write on[35] — were first written between the years c. 365 and 312 BC. What is particularly interesting is that they come from an ancient town whose:

> *economic reality … relates mainly to the cultivation of fields and orchards. Most of the documents deal with raw wheat and barley, or with their products …fruit trees, vines and olives … Our ostraca do not contain any administrative or professional titles … This feature clearly reflects a clan-tribal organisation … a rural population living on agriculture …*[36]

Many of the ostraca were composed by 'local rural writers'.[37] Many of them were dockets with all the necessary details that a modern-day receipt might have: personal names; the day, month and year of the reign of a particular ruler; and the type and amount of the product being exchanged.[38]

There is also no hint of this society being overly simplistic in its vocabulary of written words. Consider their use of units of measurement. Just as societies today have several units of measurement for a person's weight, such as pounds and stones (or grams and kilograms), so too did they. The units of measurement included three different units for wheat and barley (*kor*, *seah* and *qab*). Straw was measured in another two units and wood in yet two others. Sub-units such as a quarter and an eighth are also to be found, and so some quantities are measured as being five and three-quarters of a seah.[39] Olives are sometimes specified by the name of their cultivar and other times by their final product, such as olives from which oil for lighting was extracted.[40] The type of barley was sometimes specified and fine flour was distinguished from normal flour.[41] Amounts of money are also detailed, and labourers[42] and tax

35 Refer to chapter 4 'Literacy in the ancient world' for more details on ostraca.
36 I Ephal & J Naveh, *Aramaic Ostraca of the Fourth Century BC from Idumaea*, Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1996, pp. 10–11, 15, 16.
37 I Ephal & J Naveh, p. 16.
38 I Ephal & J Naveh, p. 11.
39 I Ephal & J Naveh, p. 11.
40 I Ephal & J Naveh, p. 13.
41 I Ephal & J Naveh, p. 11.
42 I Ephal & J Naveh, p. 54.

collectors[43] rate a mention. About 150 personal names were written on the ostraca, each with the name of the king ruling at that time. It seems that many of the individuals in this agriculturally based community were able to read and write relevant words, numbers, dates and units of measurement. They were able to create detailed receipts based on combinations of all of these. Apart from being composed as dockets, some ostraca were also used for more serious legal purposes, such as registrations of fields.[44] One also contained a plea for the release of 'the daughter of Haggai'.[45]

Graffiti in graveyards and houses

Just as graffiti in today's society sometimes reflects the passion two people have for each other at a particular meeting point, so too in the ancient world of Judea. One such piece of amorous graffiti was found in a tomb! The tomb with its Greek inscription belonged to a town that thrived between 221 and 40 BC.[46] Other graffiti reflects the imminent death of its authors. During the first major rebellion of the Jews against the Romans, in the years 66–70 AD, refugees hiding in a cave wrote on the walls in their Aramaic language 'two alphabets, a name, a call for peace and a message, 'Joezer has been taken, the [enemy] guards have entered!'[47]

The region neighbouring Judea to the east of the Jordan River, called Transjordan, also shows how incredibly prevalent literacy was in some seemingly unlikely contexts:

> *[T]he Arab tribes in Transjordan scratched graffiti on rocks and boulders … Dated to the first centuries of the present era, thousands of these have been catalogued, thousands are yet to be studied ... Limited in content to epitaphs, prayers and brief reports of an individual's activities, these are remarkable relics of people who are best described as 'literate shepherds'.*[48]

43 I Ephal & J Naveh, p. 84.
44 I Ephal & J Naveh, p. 13.
45 I Ephal & J Naveh, p. 88.
46 A Millard, pp. 104–5.
47 A Millard, p. 99.
48 A Millard, p. 101.

The literacy of this region is relevant as many Transjordanians[49] followed Jesus (see, for example, Matthew 4:24–5, Mark 3:7–10). They in turn would have spread the good news to their countrymen. Jesus cast out many demons from a man who subsequently travelled through Transjordan to tell others about his encounter with Jesus (Mark 5:18–20).

What I found particularly surprising was discovering how frequently graffiti was written inside houses! For example, consider the archaeological remains of the town of Dura-Europos, located on the River Euphrates in present-day Syria. This town has been described as 'a fairly ordinary town in the Roman Near East …'[50] Yet graffiti is found on all types of building throughout the town, including 'sanctuaries, shops, houses and fortifications'.[51] The sheer number of houses with graffiti reveals that the ability to write was very common. Of the roughly 130 houses that have been excavated so far, over a third of them (36%) had graffiti on their inside walls. As many of the walls are no longer preserved to their full height, the real number would be much higher.[52] Implements used for writing, such as wooden wax tablets and inkwells, were discovered in houses both large and small, not just those of the elite.[53] Of the total number of graffiti discovered, over 1200 are made up of words and a further 200 are pictorial in nature. The languages represented include Greek, Latin and the Semitic languages (this language group includes Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic).[54] Some are even bilingual. The vast majority of the graffiti appears to belong to the 100s and 200s AD, although some is certainly earlier.[55] All this is conclusive evidence that the ability to read and write was common amongst the various people groups of this town, which was abandoned in about 256 AD.[56]

49 English Bibles typically refer to the region as 'across the Jordan'.
50 JA Baird, 'The graffiti of Dura-Europos: a contextual approach', in JA Baird & C Taylor (eds), *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, Routledge, New York, 2011, p. 52.
51 JA Baird, p. 52.
52 JA Baird, p. 61.
53 JA Baird, p. 52.
54 JA Baird, pp. 52–3, 60.
55 JA Baird, p. 53.
56 JA Baird, p. 61.

Christian literacy

Literacy among Christians in the first few hundred years or so reflected the fact that they were converts from the Jewish, Greek and other communities in their regions. Certainly their conversions didn't result in their levels of literacy diminishing. In fact, it is likely that by becoming Christians, their proficiency in reading and writing increased. Jesus told his followers to: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind' (Matthew 22:37). The Greek word used for mind in this verse is *dianoia*, and it encompassed a person's intellectual abilities and understanding.[57] Certainly literacy was a prominent skill in the early Christian communities. As early as 65 AD, leaders within local churches were to devote themselves to the public reading of scripture (1 Timothy 4:13). The letters of Paul to the Christian communities in Thessalonica and Galatia were written between 48 and 50 AD, and the rest of his many letters before 65 AD.[58] The New Testament Gospels and most of the remaining sections were written by 65 AD.[59] If Jesus was crucified in 33 AD, it follows that within 35 years of the crucifixion of Jesus, nearly all of the key Christian scriptures still used today had already been committed to papyrus. These were avidly read and believed by the Christian community. Evidence for this trust is found in the way Christian leaders referred authoritatively to these scriptures when writing letters to their followers. References to 25 of the 27 books of the New Testament can be found in the letters of leaders such as Polycarp, Ignatius and Clement.[60] These letters were written no later than 110 AD. Clement's letter, which refers to content from 11 of the

57 S Zodhiates, *The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible: King James Version: The Old Testament: The New Testament*, Word Bible Publishers, Iowa Falls, US, 1984, pp. 1177, 1680.

58 P Barnett, *Is the New Testament History*, Aquila Press, Sydney South, 2004, p. 33. See also J McDowell & B Wilson, *Evidence for the Historical Jesus: A Compelling Case for His Life and His Claims*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, US, 1998, pp. 161–6.

59 P Barnett, pp. 34–5. See also J McDowell & B Wilson, *Evidence for the Historical Jesus: A Compelling Case for His Life and His Claims*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, US, 1998, pp. 148–9.

60 P Barnett, pp. 35–7.

New Testament books, may have been composed before 70 AD.[61] This information testifies to the importance of reading and writing among the Christian world. In the following sections, I will outline more corroborating evidence regarding significant literacy levels amongst the emerging Christian community.

Availability of writing materials

The New Testament makes us aware that writing materials were readily available. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a priest called Zechariah needed to write a short sentence and asked accordingly for a writing tablet (Luke 1:63). This event happened during the circumcising and naming of his son. Often this ceremony took place in the parents' home.[62] It is apparent from Luke's account that it was quick and easy for Zechariah's associates to find such a tablet.

Paul, who was one of the most prominent first Christian leaders, requested that his scrolls and *membrana* be brought to him whilst he was in prison (2 Timothy 4:13). *Membrana* in the first century AD were notebooks made out of animal skin (parchment).[63] The disciple John described how he wrote with 'ink and paper (papyrus)' (2 John 12 and 3 John 13). Later we read that he was commanded to write words and phrases that were revealed to him (Revelation 14:13, 21:5 and 19:9).

Surviving Christian manuscripts and letters

Large numbers of letters, books and liturgies have been discovered that were written by Christians. At Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, Christian literary manuscripts have been found going back as far as the 100s

61 TJ Herron, *Clement and the Early Church of Rome: On the Dating of Clement's First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Kindle ebook], Emmaus Road Publishing, Steubenville, US, 2008.

62 'Circumcision', *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1906, www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4391-circumcision, accessed 01/12/2018. The article states that from about 589 AD (the Geonic period) the ceremony had moved from the house to the synagogue.

63 J Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills*, The Liturgical Press St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, US, 1995, p. 36.

AD[64] and letters written by Christians to about 250 AD.[65] Even five lines of a Christian hymn to the Trinity in the late 200s AD have been discovered, complete with musical notation![66] Examples of second-century Christian literature include arguments against heretics, such as the now totally lost work composed by Agrippa Castor.[67] One of the surviving works belonging to this category is *Against Heresies* written by Irenaeus. This consists of five books, with around 194,520 words in total,[68] making it equivalent to more than three large novels.

One famous letter was written by Clement, a leader in the church in Rome, to the Christian community in Corinth. It was composed sometime before 96 AD, with convincing evidence indicating it was before 70 AD.[69] The letter reveals important aspects about the Corinthians' level of literacy and ability to concentrate. I found its length surprising: 12,500 words[70] — longer than the Gospel of Mark.[71] It's reasonable to assume that the writer expected many of the recipients to read it and re-read it, in addition to it being read aloud to others who were not as literate. Reading it to others would take more than 1 hour and 45 minutes, meaning the illiterate had to have a good concentration span or recall what was read to them over one or more sessions.

64 A Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christian and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Harvard Theological Studies, Cambridge, US, 2008, p. 18.

65 A Luijendijk, p. 11.

66 E Pöhlmann & ML West, *Documents of Ancient Greek Music: The Extant Melodies and Fragments Edited and Transcribed with Commentary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 190–4. The manuscript is labelled as Pap.Oxy.1786.

67 M Green, *The Books the Church Suppressed: Fiction and Truth in the Da Vinci Code*, Monarch Books, Oxford, 2005, pp. 89, 140.

68 Using a word-processing program word count, I found there were about 12,968 words in the first 10 chapters of Book 1, which is a little less than a third of Book 1. Therefore, 12,968 x 3 x 5= 194,520.

69 TJ Herron, *Clement and the Early Church of Rome: On the Dating of Clement's First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Kindle ebook], Emmaus Road Publishing, Steubenville, US, 2008.

70 Based on a word count from the following English translation: Clement of Rome, *First Epistle*, www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-roberts.html, accessed 01/12/2018.

71 F Just, *New Testament Statistics*, http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT-Statistics-Greek.htm, accessed 18/12/2012.

Christian libraries

Christian communities also had their own libraries. In 303 AD the Christians in the northern African city of Cirta had a room designated as a library in the house where they were meeting. This library had at least 37 items. Unfortunately, officers serving the Roman Emperor Diocletian started confiscating such Christian book collections in February of 303 AD. Diocletian had ordered that all Christian books be handed over and burnt in his efforts to stifle the growing Christian community.[72] This indicates that he:

> *took it for granted that every Christian community, wherever it might be, had a collection of books and knew that those books were essential to its viability. Thus … congregational libraries were commonplace by the late third century, and … this fact was well known to non-Christians*.[73]

Cirta was only one of the places in the African province of Numidia that faced the brunt of Diocletian's edict. A 'large number of Christian bishops' in Numidia, as well as leaders in other provinces, were in possession of Christian literature as revealed by Diocletian's agents.[74]

Christianity among the well educated

The above information establishes that there was a considerable amount of Christian literature, and that many Christian communities included those who could read and write. Next I wanted to know whether any of these early literate Christians were educated beyond an elementary level. This would help verify whether Christianity flourished even amongst educated critical thinkers.

The New Testament provides background information on only a few of those who converted to Christianity in the years shortly after Jesus' resurrection. One of these was certainly very well educated, as he was in charge of the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians (Acts

72 LD Bruce, 'A note on Christian libraries during the "Great Persecution" 303–305 A.D.', *The Journal of Library History*, 15(2), 1980, pp. 127–37.

73 HY Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*, Yale University Press, London, 1995, p. 150.

74 LD Bruce, pp. 127–37.

8:27). Another one of the early converts, Apollos from Alexandria, is described as *aner logios* (Acts 18:24). These Greek words 'could mean that he was eloquent or educated, since the two were bound together'.[75] He also knew the Old Testament extremely well and so was clearly a scholarly man.

Evidence from pagan writers demonstrates that at least some Christians were from the well-educated parts of society. A very famous Roman governor called Pliny described Christianity as if it was a disease. He wrote the following to the Roman Emperor in about 111 AD:

> *[I have] hastened to consult you … especially because of the number [of Christians] indicted, for there are many of all ages, every rank, and both sexes who are summoned and will be summoned to confront danger. The infection of this superstition [Christianity] has extended not merely through the cities, but also through the villages and country areas ...*[76]

Some of the Christian documents from the first and second centuries reveal a number of well-educated converts, such as Aristides and Justin Martyr. Aristides was a philosopher from Athens who, after becoming a Christian, wrote a defence of Christianity to be given to the Roman Emperor Hadrian (r. 117–138 AD). It seems that Aristides died towards the end of Hadrian's reign.

Aristides argued very extensively in favour of Christianity, his book being over 6500 words long. One of his subjects was the worshipping of idols, objects that merely represent parts of the created world. He noted that after creating their idols, the worshippers would then guard them against robbers. He concluded that this was ludicrous as surely the:

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75 Duane Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1–4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric,* SNTSMS 79, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 123, cited in DE Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT, Grand Rapids, Baker, 2003.

76 Pliny the Younger, *Complete Letters: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, book 10, epistle 96, section 9, trans. PG Walsh, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, p. 279. By permission of Oxford University Press. Pliny is discussed in greater detail in chapter 16.

> *guard is greater than that which is guarded, and that every one who creates is greater than that which is created. If it be, then, that their gods are too feeble to see to their own safety, how will they take thought for the safety of men?*[77]

Aristides provided logical reasons for not worshipping elements such as earth, water and fire. He pointed out that the multitude of gods worshipped by the Greeks clearly were not gods. Surely real gods would not have had the experiences that the Greek pagan writers described, such as becoming insane, being killed by lightning, kidnapped by men, or marrying their own mothers, sisters and daughters.[78]

Justin Martyr was another Greek-educated philosopher who became a Christian. He studied in Alexandria and Ephesus, and followed several different philosophers over time, such as Pythagoras and Plato. He was martyred in about 165 AD. He composed a book that is over 21,000 words long to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161 AD) and his sons. Written in about 140 AD, it presented many teachings about Christianity.[79] Justin argued that although the concept of Jesus being resurrected might seem ridiculous, it should not be immediately dismissed. Even the emperor believed that every person was created in their mother's womb from a 'small drop of human seed', despite this being so hard to imagine given the complexity of our bodies.[80] Justin contended that with God's power surely the resurrection is possible.

I did come across an argument in the literature that maintained that early Christian communities were not interested in producing literature. This was supposedly so because they expected Jesus to return from heaven in the very near future. This theoretical idea[81] later lost its force with the discovery of the beliefs and practices of another Jewish religious

77 Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides*, trans. JA Peck, Syriac version, section III, http://preachersinstitute.com/2010/04/15/the-apology-of-aristides-syriac-version, accessed 02/12/2018. A Syriac language version was discovered in 1889 on Mt Sinai.

78 Aristides, section XIII.

79 Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*. Word count based on the English translation.

80 Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*.

81 HY Gamble, p. 20. Gamble notes this idea began with Martin Dibelius (d. 1947).

community that also expected the imminent demise of the world. The Essenes thrived at the same time and in the same country as the budding Christian movement. This same group is that which produced and stored the enormous amount of literature referred to earlier as the Dead Sea Scrolls. This indicates that beliefs in the nearness of the collapse of the world could go hand in hand with writing abundantly. Sadly this community appears to have been destroyed in about 70 AD.

Conclusion

The findings of my research presented in this chapter and the previous one certainly point to a reasonable degree of literacy amongst the masses where Christianity was born during the first century AD. Also, early Christians included those who were educated beyond the basic abilities of reading and writing. Consequently, there was no parallel gross and universal ignorance about the world that allegedly allowed Christianity to flourish more than it would otherwise. In the next chapter, I'll look deeper into how literacy, or the lack thereof, relates to gullibility. In parts III and IV I will explore how such a cross-cultural level of literacy may also make it plausible that Christians used writing as a means to help capture and preserve the words of Jesus.

Discussion and reflection questions

1. What evidence is there that during the first century AD many Jews and Christians were able to read?
2. Why is it reasonable to believe that some Middle Eastern towns had a significant portion of people who could read and write?
3. How were Jews motivated by their religion to read and write?
4. *What motivates you to read a book of the Bible that you have already read several times before?
5. How has your desire to read the Bible increased since becoming interested in Jesus or since you became a follower of Jesus?
6. *If your church has a library, which books have you borrowed that have greatly helped your faith in Jesus?
7. If your town has a library, are there books in it that speak favourably about Jesus?

6

Jesus' teaching methods

The last chapter discussed the likelihood that Jesus' disciples made use of notes to help them remember all that Jesus said and did. But if they didn't have extensive notes, how reasonable is it that they could memorise Jesus' teachings? Did Jesus himself encourage memorisation? For instance, did he deliberately present his teachings in such a way that they could be easily remembered?

Could the disciples have memorised Jesus' teachings?

It is now uncommon for Australian school children (and probably children from other Western-based cultures) to commit to memory large portions of text. Yet many ordinary Australians once took great pride in their ability to memorise word-for-word quite lengthy poems.[1] Perhaps one of the most popular Australian poems was *The Man from Snowy River* by AB 'Banjo' Paterson. Individual Australians recall having learnt by heart *The Man from Snowy River*, together with other poems, in primary school (i.e. before the age of 13 years) as late as the 1950s. This poem consists of 980 words and 113 lines. Another

1 S McInerney, 'By heart', *New Springtime: A Journal of Faith, Culture and Society*, Australian Catholic Students Association, March, 2009. Dr McInerney, in December 2018, was Lecturer in Literature at Campion College Australia. See also the Australian Bush Poets Association website, www.abpa.org.au/, accessed 02/12/2018.

poem that was often recited from memory was *The Hound of Heaven* by Francis Thompson, which consisted of 1183 words and 182 lines.

These examples indicate that memory can retain information with great accuracy. But how possible is it that those Australian school children who learnt by heart several large poems could similarly memorise all the words spoken by Jesus? I found that the number of words spoken by Jesus, as recorded only in the Gospel of Mark, amounts to 3992.[2] Given that some Australians memorised more than one poem, and just two of the poems together consisted of 2163 words, it seems that many of us have the potential to memorise all of Jesus' words. However, what deductions can we make about the disciples' capacity to memorise and what evidence is there that people in Jesus' day and age actually took the effort to remember the words of their teachers.

Deductions about the disciples' capacity to memorise

Theoretically, people of 2000 years ago had the capacity to remember as well as we have today. There are no scientific reasons to believe that the normal human capacity to memorise was greater or less than today. However, there are situational reasons for accepting that the disciples' task of memorising Jesus' words was easier than that of the Australian pupils learning large poems. Whereas the school children may have learnt from a teacher possessing reasonable motivation, the disciples learnt from one who no doubt had much greater motivations. Whereas the school children had many other subjects to learn, the disciples had all their attention focused on the one subject master. Whereas Australian pupils learnt their poems indirectly from the poet, using anthologies and performers, the disciples learnt directly from a living teacher, probably with the aid of their written notes. The Australian pupil–teacher relationship would certainly never have been of the same order of magnitude as that between the disciples and Jesus. Australian teachers had only school hours during school days in which to teach poetry. Jesus had many hours each day and many more days of the year to instruct his disciples.

2 N Perrin, *Lost in Translation? What We Can Know About the Words of Jesus*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, US, 2007, p. 197.

The disciples may have had another advantage over Australians learning poetry — the advantage of being a well-bonded group. The ability to memorise material can be enhanced when students work together. Groups can accelerate learning and help keep memories alive. Consider how rapidly people can learn another language when totally immersed in a foreign culture. This is very relevant as the disciples didn't follow Jesus as disconnected individuals. They had the advantage of being a group knitted together by Jesus and constantly being worked into the one tapestry. The Gospel of John records how the disciples, after Jesus had been crucified and resurrected, 'talked and discussed' with each other 'everything that had happened' (Luke 24:15). Even groups that are large and loosely knit, such as the modern society in Israel, can collectively retain a vast amount of information. This is highlighted by the publication out of Bethlehem in 1985 of two volumes of proverbs titled: *The Proverb Says: Encyclopedia of Current Proverbs and Wisdom Sayings*. The work includes 6000 proverbs, over 4000 of which:

> *are popular and colloquial in nature and were collected orally … We are here observing a community that can create (over the centuries) and sustain in current usage up to 6,000 wisdom sayings … One of the major ways Middle Eastern people express their values is through the creating and preserving of Wisdom sayings …'*[3]

Memorisation in the ancient world

Moving on from the above reasonable deductions about the disciples' ability to memorise Jesus' words, it is fascinating to discover the actual prominence given to memorisation in the ancient world:

> *Memorizing large parts of texts or even whole texts was a common performance in the ancient world, and is attested through various school exercises or public performances …*[4]

3 KE Bailey, 'Informal controlled oral tradition and the synoptic gospels', *Asia Journal of Theology*, 5, 1991, pp. 34–54 (quote from p. 41.)

4 C Jacob, 'Athenaeus the librarian', in D Braund & J Wilkins (eds), *Athenaeus and His World: Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, UK, 2000, p. 109.

Xenophon (c. 430 to 354 BC), in his book *The Banquet (Symposium 3.6)*, describes a man called Niceratus who is asked by his fellow dinner guests about that knowledge which makes him proud. He replied that he could recite from memory all of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. (The *Iliad* alone was an epic poem of about 175,000 words.[5]) Those listening downplayed Niceratus' ability, saying that there were many others who could perform the same feat and that what really constituted an admirable feat of memorisation was much more than just the size of the text:

> *A striking feature of mnemonic performances is the ability to excerpt a few lines from a continuous text and even to move forward or backward in this 'book of memory', from any starting point.*[6]

Such memorisation also formed the basis of entertaining games. Individual players would have to recite verses from a poet that started and finished with the same letter of the alphabet. Other times it would be of verses wherein the first syllable and the last syllable together formed a certain word.[7] The ability to learn entire texts, and to move about these texts in one's mind, was imparted to slaves. A man called Calvisius Sabinus paid large sums of money to purchase slaves who had learnt the works of a famous author, such as Homer or Hesiod. These slaves were called 'living books', and they were used to provide quotes during Sabinus' conversations with his dinner guests.[8]

The Jews of the first centuries AD are also known to have cherished the art of memorisation. This is very relevant as Jesus' disciples were Jews. Jewish school children had to learn the first five books of their scripture, namely the Torah. Large portions of it had to be memorised,[9] not just for the short term but for life.[10]

The Jews weren't the only ones in the Middle East who had a culture of valuing memorisation. Professor Kenneth Bailey provides several examples of prodigious memorisation in other Middle Eastern societies,

5 See chapter 1 'Writing history and creating libraries'.
6 C Jacob, p. 110.
7 C Jacob, p. 110.
8 Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*, 3.27.5, cited by C Jacob, p. 109.
9 B Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, trans. EJ Sharpe, CWK Gleerup, Uppsala, Sweden, 1961 pp. 62–3.
10 B Gerhardsson, p. 64.

often including the memorisation of the Islamic scriptures called the Qur'an (also written as Quran). Although not all Arabic versions of the Quran are identical,[11] it contains over 6200 numbered verses.[12] He relays how various individuals had committed to memory a work consisting of 'a collection of one thousand couplets of Arabic verse, each of which defines some aspect of Arabic grammar'.[13] He then recounts how:

> *It was my privilege to study in Cairo in the [nineteen] fifties under a venerable Islamic scholar, Shaykh Sayyed, who had both of these works [the Qur'an and the collection of a thousand couplets] fully committed to memory with total recall at the age of 75. I would bring to him a couplet of Arabic poetry and ask him if it was in the Qur'an. He would close his eyes for a few seconds, mentally flip through the entire Qur'an, and then give his answer. Similarly, any point of grammar evoked the quotation of one of the one-thousand couplets …*[14]

Did Jesus cast his message in ways designed to aid memorisation?

Based on the above information, it is certainly well within reason to conclude that the 12 disciples were able to memorise all the words of Jesus recorded in the New Testament. The above comparison between the learning of poetry and Jesus' words has much merit, as it appears that many of Jesus' teachings were deliberately formulated to make memorisation as easy as possible. Just as many poems have a rhythm or rhyme that makes their memorisation easier, it has been found that:

> *The gospels … phrase over 90% of his [Jesus'] sayings in forms which would have been easy to remember, using figures and styles of speech much like those found in Hebrew poetry.*[15]

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11 S Green, 'The different Arabic versions of the Qur'an: part 2: the current situation, *Answering Islam*, www.answering-islam.org/Green/seven.htm, accessed 02/12/2018.

12 S Green, 'Comparing the Bible and the Qur'an (How to do it accurately)', *Answering Islam*, www.answering-islam.org/Green/compare.htm, accessed 02/12/2018.

13 KE Bailey, p. 38.

14 KE Bailey, p. 38.

15 C Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 1st edn, Inter-Varsity Press, Illinois, 1987, pp. 27–8, summarising R Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer* (Doctoral Dissertation), Mohr Tubingen, Germany, 1981.

Techniques used to aid people's memory are called mnemonic devices, and Jesus used a large variety of these. Although many of these are apparent in our Greek New Testament texts, even more of them are revealed when the Greek texts are translated back into Aramaic, which is the language that Jesus probably used the most.[16] These include parables, hyperbole, 'puns, metaphors and similes, proverbs, riddles, and parabolic actions [i.e. actions that convey a message] …'[17] Most of all he used poetry. These aspects fully show the extent to which Jesus went in training his disciples to remember his teachings. The following is a brief look at a few of the mnemonic devices used by Jesus.

Parables

Jesus was a master at telling parables. There are 41 parables in the first three Gospels alone.[18] Although the rabbis of the first two centuries AD made use of parables, their parables had a different purpose. They did not use parables to teach new truths but to explain scripture or their various laws.[19] In contrast, Jesus used parables to convey new truths. Jesus' parables were anchored in the realities of the daily life of his society, making them even easier to remember. It's easy to imagine that every time his disciples saw workers in a vineyard, they would remember his parable about similar employees complaining about their rates of pay (Matthew 20:1–16). Or every time they saw fishermen with their nets sorting out their catch, they would remember the corresponding parable (Matthew 13:47–48). As one scholar said about them:

> *His parables take us … into the midst of throbbing everyday life. Their nearness to life, their simplicity and clarity, the masterly*

16 AM Berlin & JA Overman, 'Introduction', in AM Berlin & JA Overman (eds), *The First Jewish Revolt: Archaeology, History, and Ideology*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 9. They state that the active spoken language of Jews in Judea was Aramaic. More specifically it has been said that Jesus spoke a Galilean version of western Aramaic (J Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, vol.1, trans. J Bowden, SCM Press, London, 1971, p. 4).

17 RH Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, US, 1988, p. 200.

18 J Jeremias, p. 30.

19 S Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, US, 1980, pp. xvi–xvii.

brevity with which they were told, the seriousness of their appeal to conscience, their loving understanding of the outcasts of religion — all this is without analogy.[20]

Actions speak louder than words

Perhaps the most striking technique Jesus used to ingrain his teachings into the minds of his disciples was his use of parabolic actions. These are actions that teach in their own right and so do not always require an explanation. Perhaps the clearest of these is Jesus' decision to have 12 disciples. This was to reflect that the nation of Israel originally consisted of 12 tribes descended from 12 sons. By his action, Jesus was saying that he was establishing a new Israel. That this message was recognised by the disciples is shown by their urgency at appointing another disciple as a substitute for Judas, who had betrayed Jesus shortly before his crucifixion.[21]

The link between actions and teachings is sometimes made particularly clear in the Gospels. One Gospel contains an account of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people with only five loaves of bread and two fish (John 6:1–15). The day after this miracle Jesus makes a striking declaration to the crowd: 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never go thirsty' (John 6:35).

Poetry

Poetry is a very useful mnemonic device, as is evident by the ease with which people remember songs and long ballads. The types of poetry that Jesus used are called parallelisms, which exist in many forms. Nearly 190 different examples of parallelism can be found in Jesus' teachings.[22] Parallelisms occur when a thought is echoed or repeated in the next line of the poem, whilst also maintaining the same rhythm. These poems are

20 J Jeremias, p. 30.

21 Acts 1:12–26.

22 RH Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*, p. 200; citing RH Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, Westminster, Philadelphia, US, 1978, pp. 27–32.

built on the basis of rhythm being more important than rhyme, and they are classified into five different forms.[23] A synonymous parallelism is when the thought is repeated almost identically, whereas an antithetical parallelism is when the second line of verse is in contrast to the first. Of the following four examples, the first represents synonymous parallelism and the remaining examples are of antithetical parallelism:

> Ask and it will be given to you;
> Search and you will find;
> Knock and the door will be opened to you.[24]

> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit,
> And a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.[25]

> Whoever finds their life will lose it,
> And whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.[26]

> Whoever can be trusted with very little
> Can also be trusted with much,
> And whoever is dishonest with very little
> Will also be dishonest with much.[27]

Antithetic parallelisms spoken by Jesus are extremely prolific in the Gospels. One scholar found 138 examples of antithetic parallelisms in the first three Gospels alone.[28] Jesus used this form of speech in a very consistent and particular manner, namely placing the emphasis on the second line. This is in contrast to the Old Testament where the second line 'serves, on the whole, to illuminate and to deepen the first by an opposed statement …'[29] This consistency would have further assisted correct memorisation of Jesus' exact words. Sometimes Jesus incorporated several mnemonic devices in the one lesson, as shown in the following parable that also uses antithetical parallelism:

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23 The three forms of parallelism not discussed here are synthetic, chiasmic, and step. RH Stein, p. 200.
24 Matthew 7:7
25 Matthew 7:18
26 Matthew 10:39
27 Luke 16:10
28 J Jeremias, pp. 14–16.
29 J Jeremias, p. 18.

Enter through the narrow gate.
For wide is the gate and broad is the road
That leads to destruction,
And many enter through it.
But small is the gate and narrow the road
That leads to life,
And only a few find it.[30]

Sometimes Jesus' poetry involved rhythm only, without making use of parallelisms. Jesus' teachings incorporated several types of rhythm, including those with two, three and four beats. He took advantage of the mood, invoking abilities of rhythm to match the essence of what he was saying. For example, the briefness of two-beat rhythm requires abruptness of thought and word, creating a feeling of urgency and importance. Jesus used this form often when he 'wanted to impress upon his hearers *central ideas* of his message'.[31] Jesus spoke the following rhyme found in Matthew 10:8 without using joining words (conjunctions):[32]

Asthenountas therapeuete	Heal sick
Nekrous egeirete	Raise dead
Leprous katharizete	Cleanse lepers
Daimonia ekballete	Expel demons

Miscellaneous techniques

In addition to the above mnemonic techniques, Jesus used several others, such as alliteration, assonance and antitheses.[33] The latter occur when contrasts are made between two aspects, but in a manner that is not as symmetrical as antithetic parallelisms. A typical antithesis can be found in Mark 10:45:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve …

30 Matthew 7:13–14
31 J Jeremias, p. 22. Emphasis in the original.
32 J Jeremias, p. 21. It also rhymes in Aramaic. I have shown the English equivalent words and transliteration from the Greek. The omitting of conjunctions is called an asyndeton.
33 J Jeremias, pp. 14, 27–9.

Having discovered these aspects of Jesus as a consummate teacher, it seems certain that the first disciples were expected to memorise the words and stories of Jesus. It has been proposed by one scholar that they had a system in place similar to the rigid:

> *patterns of memorization and paraphrase dominant in rabbinic circles in the centuries immediately following the birth of Christianity. According to [Professor] Riesenfeld, Jesus probably had his disciples memorize his most significant teachings and perhaps even certain narratives about what he did. Thus there is every reason to believe that they were reliably preserved. Riesenfeld's student, Birger Gerhardsson ... has documented how widespread and prodigious the practice of memorization was in ancient rabbinic circles (many rabbis had the entire Old Testament and much of the oral law committed to memory!).*[34]

Why do the Gospels differ from each other?

The above discussion on the great accuracy possible in memorising Jesus' teachings and encounters, and the previous chapter's investigation into the likelihood that written notes were utilised, create confidence that the Gospels are a faithful record of Jesus' life and teachings. However, undermining this impression is the question of why it is that the four written Gospel accounts often record the same story or lesson but with minor differences. The similarities are enormous, but differences are certainly present. Why are there any differences between the Gospels at all?

What I found was that the vast bulk of differences could easily be envisaged as growing out of the influence of five principles at work in the minds of the Gospel authors:

34 C Blomberg, pp. 25–6. Blomberg refers to several texts, including: H Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, US, 1970, pp. 1–29; B Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*, Gleerup, Lund, Sweden, 1964; and B Gerhardsson, *The Origins of the Gospel Tradition*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, US, 1979.

- flexibility in describing background material
- flexibility in Jesus' non-essential words
- variation inherent in Jesus' teachings
- variations in Aramaic to Greek translations
- the freedom to select but not to fabricate.

These principles may not have been in the forefront of their minds, but rather operated at a subconscious level. I have called these principles frameworks of understanding. Just as the framework of a house under construction brings awareness of how the house will form, so too these frameworks create an understanding of how the differences were born.

Flexibility in describing background material

The first framework is that the disciples committed to memory Jesus' *essential teachings* perfectly accurately, though the background information was allowed to be remembered in a more flexible form. For example, the Gospels record that a paralysed man was brought to Jesus on a mat. The initial description of the mat varies between the Gospels. In Matthew 9:2 and Luke 5:18 the Greek word for mat is κλίνη (*kline*), whilst in Mark 2:4 it is κράβαττος (*krabattos*).[35] Both these forms are suitable words for mat, though Mark's word is a slang expression and is akin to 'pad'.[36]

Another example concerns the time when Jesus walked to the wilderness where he was tempted. Luke's Gospel records that Jesus was led [ήγετο ēgeto] by the Spirit (Luke 4:1), Matthew notes that Jesus was led up [ἀνήχθη anēchthe] by the Spirit (Matthew 4:1, NASB), and Mark speaks of how the Spirit drove [ἐκβάλλει ekballei] Jesus into the

35 WD Mounce, *Interlinear for the Rest of Us: The Reverse Interlinear for New Testament Word Studies*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, US, 2006.

36 These examples are taken from Stein, who explains the variations being due to Matthew and Luke using 'a refinement of [Greek] style'; RH Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*, p. 53.

wild (Mark 1:12, NASB).[37] It is, of course, quite reasonable to expect that background information, which merely provides a setting for Jesus' words, although uniform in its basic content, wasn't regarded as having to be remembered precisely.

Flexibility in Jesus' non-essential words

The second framework is that the disciples committed to memory Jesus' *essential words* in a precise word-for-word fashion. However, those words of Jesus that supply the broad brushstrokes of the picture were remembered in a more flexible form. Consider the account of the paralysed man mentioned above. In Matthew 9:2 we read that Jesus told a paralysed man: 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven'. However Luke 5:20 records that Jesus said: 'Friend, your sins are forgiven'. This difference may be due to the disciples being taught to remember in a word-for-word fashion the essential element of the conversation ('your sins are forgiven'), whilst being granted freedom to recall the less important aspect ('Take heart, son' versus 'Friend') more loosely. However, even the existence of some words of Jesus being recalled loosely does not necessarily imply that these words were totally fabricated. During his short time with him, Jesus may have conversed more with the paralysed man than what is recorded. If so, it is quite conceivable that at different stages in the conversation Jesus addressed the man both as 'friend' and as 'son'.

The reports about the healing of the paralysed man provide another example of the disciples memorising the essential words of Jesus. Depending on the Gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying:

> *'Which is easier: to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up and walk"? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the paralyzed man, 'Get up, take your mat [*kline*] and go home.'(Matthew 9:5–6)*
>
> *'Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up, take your mat and walk"? But I*

37 Again, these examples with their English translation are taken from Stein, who explains the variations being due to Matthew and Luke using 'a refinement of [Greek] style'. RH Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*, 1987, p. 53.

> *want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the man, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat [*krabattos*] and go home.' (Mark 2:9–11)*
>
> *'Which is easier: to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up and walk"? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the paralyzed man, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat [*klinidion*] and go home.' (Luke 5:23–4)*

Not only is the essential message in the three different accounts the same, but so too are the essential words. The main areas of variation are with the non-essential words, such as the use of the various Greek words for mat and 'paralytic' verses 'paralysed' man.

Variation inherent in Jesus' teachings

The third framework is that Jesus varied the presentation of his messages. It is easy to appreciate that Jesus, as a teacher, would have repeated many of his lessons to his disciples. Constant repetition and memorisation were the principal techniques used by all educators at that time:[38]

> *A teacher would typically check whether his teachings were being remembered by requiring his pupils to repeat them back to him, and might well drill them in what he regarded as the most important axioms, maxims and rules he was endeavouring to inculcate*.[39]

Some of this memorisation may have been based on a word-for-word format. This is especially likely with those teachings that were in a poetic form, or some other mnemonic structure, that required the words to remain the same. However, some of his teaching was in forms that allowed a certain degree of flexibility without detracting from conveying the essentials. Parables could easily have been retold by Jesus in such a way that the same basic story may have been

38 JDG Dunn, 'Social memory and the oral Jesus tradition', in *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity: The Fifth Durham-Tubingen Research Symposium (Durham, September 2004)*, Mohr Siebech, Tubingen, Germany, 2007, p. 185.

39 JDG Dunn, p. 186.

taught but with various alterations from time to time. This can be seen in the two similar parables Jesus gave that spoke about investing (Matthew 25:14–30, Luke 19:11–27). The general plot is of servants receiving money to invest whilst the master went away. Matthew's account speaks of three servants receiving five, two and one *talent(s)* respectively. A talent denoted a very large sum of money. Luke's Gospel has a vaguely similar parable, with ten servants receiving one *mina* each. A mina was worth only a sixtieth of a talent. However, when the servants report back to their masters what they did with the money, the reports are from three servants in both cases, with one of these being disreputable. In Matthew's account the lazy servant hid the money in the ground, whilst in Luke's the money was put in some cloth. Both Gospels record the master as saying that the servant was wicked (ponēros) and should have at least deposited the money in a bank so that it could earn interest. Therefore, when the same basic parable is recorded differently from one Gospel to the next, some of this difference may be due to the writers choosing different versions that were taught by Jesus. Regardless of the version, the essential message is identical.

Variations in Aramaic to Greek translations

The fourth framework is that some differences between the Gospels arose due to matters concerning translation. If we recall that Jesus mostly spoke in Aramaic, then it is understandable that different Gospel writers may have chosen slightly different ways of translating the words of Jesus that provide non-essential background information. For example the Gospels recount how Jesus brought back to life the daughter of a ruler. Luke 8:54 tells it this way:

> *But he took her by the hand and said, 'My child, get up!'*

Mark, on the other hand, decided to record some of the actual Aramaic words Jesus said, and it is retold in Mark 5:41 as:

> *He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha koum' (which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, get up!')*

The above also serves as an example of how the different Gospel writers had different styles: Mark tended to preserve Aramaic words whereas the others let them drop.[40]

This variation in preservation of the actual Aramaic words that Jesus spoke also relates to how they preserved the Aramaic poetic and other structures found in Jesus' speech. Close examination of the first three Gospels indicates that Luke deviated from the original antithetical poetic form that the others used about 6 out of 17 times, probably because it made the Greek text seem very unattractive to him.[41] However, his alterations do not change the essence of what was being taught. Hence in Luke 12:4 the text reads:

… do not be afraid of those
Who kill the body
And after that can do no more.

But in Matthew 10:28 we have the more poetic structure carried over:

Do not be afraid of those
Who kill the body
But cannot kill the soul.

Sometimes Jesus may have varied his use of Aramaic terms. For example, the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples has the following words as recorded in Matthew 6:12–13:

And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil. (NASB)

Whereas in Luke 11:4 the prayer has these words:

And forgive us our sins
For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
And lead us not into temptation. (NASB)

40 RH Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*, pp. 55–8. Stein provides seven such examples.

41 J Jeremias, p. 17, notes 3 & 4.

In the first line of the above quotes, Matthew uses the Greek word for debt (*opheilēma*) instead of the more expected Greek word for sin (*hamartia*). The word 'debt' reflects the original Aramaic language in which Jesus spoke the prayer. It has been found that in other ancient Aramaic literature the Aramaic word for debt is used as a substitute for sin when translating Old Testament texts.[42] However, it is also reasonable to speculate that Jesus fluctuated in his use of the words for sin. Certainly Jesus would have repeated this prayer many times as he prayed with his disciples and others over the years. Sometimes he may have varied the content of the prayer with the addition, or subtraction, of a few words. Sometimes he may have prayed using Aramaic language and other times in Greek. Jesus was most likely fluent in at least these two languages.[43]

Freedom to select, but not freedom to fabricate

The fifth framework accounts for variations caused by the selection choices of the Gospel writers. Reading the Gospels also makes it clear that what each writer chose to record varied. This factor would also create small variations between the Gospels in the retelling of the same event. Consider the following three examples.

In the retelling of the encounter Jesus had with the man who was paralysed and presented to him on a mat, Mark and Luke record how the man had to be lowered down through the roof in order to get past the crowd, whereas Matthew skips over this and simply records that the man was brought to Jesus on his mat.[44]

A similar example can be found when reading how Jesus delivered a man from a mob of demons, and then sent the demons into a herd of pigs. Two of the Gospel writers (Mark 5:1–20 and Luke 8:26–39) refer to Jesus dealing with one possessed man, whilst one other Gospel writer (Matthew 8:28–34) speaks of two such men. This

42 RH Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*, p. 98. It has also been stated that: 'The Aramaic ôbâ means both *debts* [failure to fulfil obligations] and *sins* [committing evil actions]' (KE Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, Illinois, US, 2008, p. 252).

43 RH Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*, p. 208

44 Matthew 9:1–2; Mark 2:1–4; Luke 5:18–19.

minor difference isn't contradictory, as Mark and Luke do not say that there was only one man. However, it is easy to envisage that Mark and Luke may have had reasons for not bothering to mention the other man. One of the men may well have been much more part of the action than the other, and may have done all of the speaking. Perhaps they considered that the essential elements of the story could be more easily conveyed using just one man and perhaps they wanted their readers to concentrate on other aspects of the account. It is likely that at the end of the encounter Jesus dealt with the two previously afflicted men in different ways, only one of which was important enough for Mark and Luke to include in their story. Matthew doesn't describe what happened to either of the men after the demons were expelled.

The disciples didn't just bring their intellects to Jesus; they also brought their personalities and individual life histories. Jesus didn't proceed to turn them into identities that merely regurgitated the deeds and teachings of their master. Consequently, what greatly resonated within one disciple would have been less engrossing for another. When they relayed to their listeners and readers what Jesus instructed them to teach, they would also have imparted variously those other aspects that had impacted them the most.[45] Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Matthew largely focused on Jesus being the Son of David, Mark on Jesus as the suffering servant, Luke on Jesus as the compassionate teacher, and John on Jesus as God in human flesh.[46] Each of these facets of Jesus is apparent in each of the Gospels, but they are not equally highlighted from one Gospel to the next.

Why four Gospels instead of one?

The various influences that the Gospel writers have had on the grand story of Jesus does raise the question as to why we have four Gospels stemming from the original single group of 12 disciples. Surely it would have been preferable if they could have agreed with one another enough so as to produce just one Gospel! The reality is that the Gospel writers wrote with different readers in mind, and this was one of the factors that created a need for different accounts.

45 JDG Dunn, pp. 188–91.

46 C Blomberg, p. 74.

For example, Matthew appears to have written his Gospel primarily for those knowledgeable in the teachings of the Old Testament, while Mark directed his Gospel writing to those who were quite unfamiliar with Jewish customs. Mark's Gospel differed to Matthew's and Luke's Gospels in that he:

> *traced the journey of the disciples from doubt and belief, and he aimed to take his readers and hearers on that same journey. His Gospel is an evangelistic tool — a resource book for evangelists … It was intended to be read aloud wherever people gathered … to produce a Gospel containing the deeds rather than the teachings of Jesus …*[47]

The Gospel writers also had a variety of sources of information about Jesus. How heavily they used one source or another also would have affected the finished written account. Matthew and John, having been disciples of Jesus from the beginning, would have been able to draw on their own memories and lessons learnt while students of Jesus. They also could have accessed any written notes made by themselves and their colleagues. Mark wrote his Gospel having learnt it from the disciple Peter, who in turn may have used the notes made by one or more other disciples.[48] Luke explicitly states that he used the accounts of others who were directly associated with Jesus and the first disciples (Luke 1:1–2). Luke may well have been handed written notes from many of the first 12 disciples when he spent about two years staying with them in Jerusalem.[49] In essence, each Gospel writer added their portrait to the collective art gallery in order to help viewers have a more three-dimensional understanding of the colossal figure of Jesus, the God-man.

One way to view the divergences arising from having four different Gospel accounts is to consider the following analogy: If four

47 BW Powers, p. 12.

48 Peter was 'present for certain events (usually with James and John) when the rest were not … [making] it credible that Matthew would want to consult Mark for at least some information' (C Blomberg, p. 45).

49 Luke appears to have stayed in Jerusalem for the entire period between the years 57 AD and 59 AD (R Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*, William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, US, 1998, pp. 322–5).

photographers were asked by a travel magazine to submit their best three unedited photographs of the eastern face of a particular mountain, it would be unlikely that all four would supply identical pictures. One photographer may have considered that autumn was the best season to capture the true essence of the mountain, and consequently supplied photographs from that season. The other photographers may have preferred other seasons. Some of the photographers may have focused their lenses on a waterfall cascading down a tree-lined slope, while others focused theirs above the snow line. Whatever their preferences, each photographer still provided unedited and accurate images of the eastern face. In this scenario it would be very unreasonable for the travel magazine's editor to say that in exercising personal judgements the photographers deliberately attempted to present a false picture of the mountain's terrain. As Dr Perrin, a professor of the New Testament noted:

> *… even the most realistic representation requires selectivity and personal judgement … And yet there is remarkable continuity in how the … [four Gospel writers] present Jesus. Any discussion of the differences between the Gospels, in order to be fair-minded, must be set against the basic recognition that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are far more similar in what they purport than they are different.*[50]

Dr Perrin goes on to note how the early Christian writer Irenaeus (130–202 AD) extolled the virtues of having four accounts of Jesus' life and teachings:

> *Irenaeus is more or less saying that no one gospel has the bottom line on the person of Jesus Christ. Each evangelist writes a truthful account so far as a factual account of Jesus' life goes. And each evangelist offers a self-contained account that stands on its own two feet, and each gospel can be used, if properly read, to refute various heresies. But no one gospel gives an exhaustive account of Jesus Christ … Together the four gospels create the framework for the truth and mark off its boundaries …*[51]

50 N Perrin, p. 105.

51 N Perrin, pp. 121–2.

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the nuances of language translation and other factors, it seems very reasonable to conclude that we do have a direct link to Jesus' teachings. When we read the words of Jesus in the New Testament today, we are also hearing him speak the thoughts and words he spoke all those years ago. One professor expressed his confidence in the New Testament eloquently:

> *there is every reason to believe that many of the sayings and actions of Jesus would have been very carefully safeguarded in the first decades of the church's history, not so slavishly as to hamper freedom to paraphrase, explain, abbreviate and rearrange, but faithfully enough to produce reliable accounts of those facets of Christ's ministry selected for preservation*.[52]

Knowing that there were more than adequate reasons for believing that the disciples recorded accurately what Jesus said, my next question was: How is it possible to be confident that this material has been copied accurately over many hundreds of years?

1. How would you respond to someone who said that because the four Gospel accounts are different to each other we can't really know the truth about Jesus?

Appendix 6.1

Did Jesus discourage memorisation amongst his disciples?

It is pertinent to point out that the New Testament doesn't specifically record Jesus saying 'Memorise this'. But this isn't surprising as it is normal for authors not to state that which they expect their readers to know or be able to infer. It was so common for a teacher in Jesus' culture to expect some degree of memorisation that the New Testament writers would have considered that it 'did not need mentioning'.[53] As shown in the previous chapter, Jesus was widely regarded as a teacher.

52 C Blomberg, pp. 30–1.

53 R Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, US, 2006, p. 284.

There is one verse in the New Testament that some may understand as implying that Jesus downplayed the need for the disciples to memorise his teachings:

> *All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:25–7)*

It seems to some that by telling the disciples that the Holy Spirit will remind them of everything Jesus had said that Jesus was implying that they didn't need to put effort into remembering it in the first instance. However, this is only an inference, or an extrapolation. It is reasonable to understand that Jesus was reassuring the disciples that they would not need to solely rely on their previous efforts to retain Jesus' teachings.

The immediate context of Jesus' statement is one of reassurance, rather than of encouragement to complacency in enshrining his words. The passage above ends with Jesus offering peace and instructing the disciples to take heart. A few sentences before the passage, Jesus told the disciples that he is:

> *going to the Father …And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever — the Spirit of truth … I will not leave you as orphans. (John 14:12,16–18)*

Other considerations also indicate that Jesus did not intend the words of John 14:26 to be an excuse for not retaining his words:

- In the same breath that Jesus told the disciples that the Holy Spirit will remind them of words, he also declares that the Holy Spirit will teach them 'all things'. If it is correct to infer that Jesus was encouraging the disciples to be lackadaisical about remembering, then it would also be correct that Jesus was not diligent about being a teacher. The idea of Jesus being a half-hearted teacher goes against the tenor of the Gospels: Jesus was very renown for being a teacher, as shown in my previous chapter.

- The next time John records Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit, the context is reassurance that during persecution and execution they will be able to stay loyal to Jesus:

  When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father — the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father — he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. All this I have told you so that you will not fall away. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. (John 15:26 to 16:2)

- When other Gospel writers record Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit, it is also in a context of reassurance during persecution:

  On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given to you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death … Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Mark 13:9–13)

  On my account you will be brought before governors and kings, as witnesses to them and to the gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death … You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:18–22)

In these passages it can be seen that the Holy Spirit will provide the disciples with the correct words when they are being brought to trial. There is no indication that Jesus expected the Holy Spirit to do the work of providing words every day and on every occasion.

Discussion and reflection questions

1. Have you or anyone you know ever committed to memory more than 20 successive words of Jesus' teachings? If you were to do this now, what verses would you memorise and why?
2. Have you or anyone you know ever committed to memory more than 40 successive words of a song, poem or speech?
3. What techniques can be used to help memorise information?
4. How would you respond to someone who asked you why there are four Gospels instead of one?
5. Who do you think was the target audience for each of the Gospels and why?