

The Gospels

Historical and True

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Vatican II says:

"It is common knowledge that among all the Scriptures, even those of the New Testament, the Gospels have a special pre-eminence, and this because they are the principal witness to the life and teaching of the Word Incarnate, our Saviour.

"The Church has in every age held and holds that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin, in so far as the apostles preached by order of Christ, and later, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this message was transmitted in writing by them and by men of their circle as a foundation of the faith, that is the fourfold Gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

"Holy Mother Church has maintained and maintains with entire constancy and steadfastness that the four above-mentioned Gospels whose historicity she affirms without hesitation, faithfully relate what Jesus the Son of God, while he passed his life among men, did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day when he was taken up into heaven (cf Acts 1:1-2)... The sacred writers, when they composed the four Gospels, made a selection of some of the many things that had been transmitted orally or in writing. Some of these they related in an abbreviated form or explained with due regard for the situation of the Churches. They retained the character of the original preaching, in such a way as always to impart to us an honest and true account of Jesus".

Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation

In our 20th century some scholars have maintained that Jesus never existed, that his person is the expression of some powerful ideas endowed with such great creative force as to become concretized in terms of an historical personality. (L. Couchoud, *Le mystere de Jesus*, Paris, 1924) These attempts are made on the basis of unacceptable ideological presuppositions which fail the test of real criticism.

Actually, we have much more abundant sources of information on the person of Jesus Christ than we have on almost any other personality of antiquity. The historical documents which witness his existence and activity are exceptional both in their number and critical value.

Pagan Sources for the History of Christ

Tacitus, a great Latin historian, writing around the year 116, devotes a whole page of his *Annals* to Jesus. In speaking of the burning of Rome, which was presumably the work of Nero himself, he attempts to recapture the drama of the destruction of Troy. Tacitus claims that the emperor, in order

to quell the voices accusing him of having been the cause of the disaster, accused those people who were called "Chrestians". He goes on to say that the founder of this sect, Christ (Chrestus), had been put to death by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Tiberius. This 'dangerous superstition' which, for a time was successfully controlled, began to spread from Judea, where it first originated, to the City (of Rome), where all the most common and shameful things seem to congregate and win applause. (Annals, XV, 44) This brief description, which Tacitus probably found in the Senate archives, fully supports what we knew of Jesus from the Gospels. He is a Jew who was put to death, under the reign of Tiberius, by the procurator Pontius Pilate; he was the initiator of a religious movement whose followers are called Christians. For the Latin historian, Jesus is an historical personality, living at a precisely determined moment in history, a few decades prior to Tacitus' writing.

Tacitus' witness is confirmed by the writings of Suetonius around the year 120. In his *Life of Claudius*, he tells us that this Emperor expelled the Jews from Rome because of their constant agitations "over Chrestus". (Vita Claudii, XXV) The word which he uses, "Chrestus", obviously stands for Christ, the Greek translation of the Hebrew term "Messiah" (anointed). Suetonius alludes to the frequent heated debates between Christians and Jews on the nature and teachings of Christ. Still, as Ricciotti observes, "since he was only poorly informed on the subject of Christianity, Suetonius seems to believe that this Chrestus was personally present in Rome at the time and had provoked the rioting himself". (Ricciotti, *Life of Christ*, 2nd ed., Milan, 1941, p.107) But even for Suetonius, Christ is a real person and not a myth.

Before Tacitus and Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Roman governor of Bithynia (in modern Northern Turkey), in his correspondence with the Emperor Trajan (A.D. 112) speaks of Christians and their presence throughout the territory under his administration. Describing their religious practices, he says that they used to congregate at dawn on a given day to sing hymns to Christ whom they regarded as their God. (Pliny, *Letters*, X, 96)

From this testimony, written less than 100 years after the death of Jesus, we have exact information regarding the place and time in which Christ lived. These sources speak of him as an historical personage, and not a myth, as would be expected from the Orient.

Jewish Sources

On the subject of Jesus, the Jews used a conspiracy of silence. This explains the scarcity of Jewish sources regarding Jesus. No matter how hard they tried to discredit Christ as a person, they never made any attempt to cast doubt upon the historical reality of his existence. The only author to present the figure of Jesus in its real grandeur was Flavius Josephus. "In those times", he writes, "there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed he can be called a man; for he was a doer of the most extraordinary deeds, and the teacher of men who receive the truth with joy. He attracted many Jews to himself, and many Greeks as well: he is the Christ". (Jewish Antiquities, XVIII, 63-64)

We might ask why the evidence from non-Christian sources is so scarce. The answer is not difficult. The importance of Christianity was not apparent from its beginnings: the events took place in a remote province of the Roman Empire, and they were hardly such as to provoke any great notice. Only in the second century, when the progress of the Christian movement began to take on imposing dimensions, did the pagans begin to show an interest in it by criticizing and attacking its doctrines. (Best known among these early pagan polemical writers is Celsus, whose work was refuted by Origen.)

The Gospels

The most important sources for the life and teaching of Jesus are the Christian sources. In their letters, the Apostles (and especially St. Paul) allude to many facts in the life of Christ; these allusions, however, are only drops of water compared to the wealth of information presented by the four Gospels.

The word Gospel is from the Greek, *euangelion*, meaning, the good news. In the language of the New Testament the term is applied to the proclamation of the Messiah and his Messianic kingdom (Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:14). When the good news preached by the Messiah was written, the word was extended to include the four books in which the good news was contained. In this last sense the term has passed into current usage indicating the story of Christ's life and the outline of his teaching, as written by four authors.

Since Jesus neither wrote anything himself nor instructed his Apostles to write, they were at first occupied with preaching the doctrine learned from the lips of the Messiah himself. The proliferation of Christian communities created the need for a written version of what the Apostles were preaching. This gave rise to various collections of Jesus' deeds and sayings. From among these various accounts, the Church has chosen and officially approved four, commonly called the Gospels, which represent the most ancient sources of the life and teaching of Christ.

It follows that we must critically evaluate the authenticity, integrity and historicity of these sources.

Authenticity of the Gospels

A document is genuine or authentic if it is actually written by the person to whom it is attributed. The problem of authenticity does not present any particular difficulty today: an author signs his work, indicating the place and date of publication. For ancient documents, however, this was not usually the case. More than once the work of one author has been freely attributed to another on grounds of merely external similarities, or on the basis of a similar name. Only by slow process have competent literary critics managed to correct these mistakes. For example, for centuries it was believed that the book on the Celestial Hierarchies was the work of Dionysius Areopagite, the convert of St. Paul (Acts 17:34), whereas it has now been demonstrated that a neo-Platonic philosopher of the fifth century, commonly referred to as "Pseudo-Dionysius" wrote it. Scholars of the classics are still arguing the authenticity of some works, for example, the so-called Appendix Vergiliana and the two letters to Caesar attributed to Sallust. The authenticity of a document is important, because it influences the document's value.

The Gospels must also undergo the test for authenticity: who is their author? In examining the codices or manuscript scrolls of the Gospels, we find that they bear the names of four distinct authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If we consider the fact that these codices, more than four thousand of them from the period between the fourth and the ninth centuries, came from every part of the Roman Empire (and beyond), then we can appreciate the value represented by this unanimity. There is not a single exception: not one of them mentions the name of any author other than these four. Certainly, if there had not been a consensus, such perfect unanimity could never have resulted. This unanimity of Greek, Latin, Coptic and Syriac codices leaves no room for doubt.

The authenticity of the Gospels is further corroborated by the historical testimony of ancient writers and Fathers of the Church who were familiar with the Gospels and informed about their real authorship.

Testimony of Papias, A.D. 125

Around the year 125, Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia (in modern Eastern Turkey), wrote a commentary of five books on the "sayings of our Lord". Fragments of this work, which refer to the first two Gospels, have been preserved in the history of Eusebius of Caesarea. Papias reports that every so often he had an opportunity to meet personally with people who had actually known the Apostles, and that he used to ask them questions in order to determine what the Apostles actually taught. He did this, he reports, because he was convinced that it was much more useful to hear the "living voice of the survivors" than merely to read their books. Among those whom Papias questioned was "Presbyter John," probably a disciple of John the Evangelist from whom Papias learned a few facts about Mark and Matthew: This is how the presbyter refers to Mark:

"Mark, the interpreter of Peter, wrote most diligently, but not in strict order, everything he could remember of the deeds and sayings of the Lord. He, himself, of course, had never heard or seen the Lord. But he was constantly with Peter, who was preaching the Gospel for the benefit of those who listened and not with the intention of weaving together the story of our Saviour's discourses (logia). That is why Mark does not err in writing some things as if he recalled them himself. His whole preoccupation was with losing nothing of what he had heard and not allowing anything false to make its way into his account".

In speaking of Matthew, he has this to say:

"Matthew organized the sayings of our Lord in the Hebrew dialect: Everyone then interpreted them according to his own capacity." (Eusebius of Caesarea: *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 39)

By the term *logia*, Papias refers not only to the discourses of Jesus, but also his works: this is evident from the fact that he had first described Mark as writing about "the deeds and sayings" of the Saviour.

Papias' testimony is most valuable because it was made only 50 years after the composition of the Synoptic Gospels, and comes from a person who had immediate contact with those who had actually seen the Apostles. No one could possibly be better informed.

(Footnote: The word Synoptic as applied to the Gospels means that the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) permit the reader to embrace the whole narrative of Christ's activity in one single glance; they follow the same line of development.)

Irenaeus, A.D. 170

Around the year 170, Irenaeus shed some light on this problem of who actually wrote the Gospels. St. Irenaeus (A.D. 140-202) was Bishop of Lyons, native of Asia Minor, and a disciple of Polycarp, the saintly Bishop of Smyrna, who was a disciple of John the Evangelist. (Irenaeus: *Adversus Haereses*, (Against the Heresies) III, II, 7) He makes mention of the four Gospels:

"Matthew wrote the Gospel among the Hebrews, in their own language, while Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel in Rome and founding the Church there. After their departure (death?) Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, composed a written version of what Peter had preached. Then Luke, Paul's companion and disciple, committed his preaching to book form. Then John, too, the disciple of the Lord, who had leaned upon his breast, published his Gospel while he was living at Ephesus in Asia." (Ibid., III, I, 2)

A few chapters later Irenaeus adds: "So great is the stability regarding the Gospels that their authenticity is attested to even by the heretics who take them as a point of departure in their attempts to establish their own teachings". (Ibid., III, II, 7) The only exception to this statement is the Ebionite sect, which accepted only Matthew's Gospel.

Having lived in France and having had constant contact with Rome, Irenaeus is familiar with the authors of all four Gospels; he even dates the precise time of their composition. In this he confirms the information given by Papias.

Clement, Origen, Tertullian. A.D. 200

Towards the year 200, Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215), speaks of the "four Gospels handed down to our own day" (Stromata, III, 13) and is familiar with a tradition which holds that the first Gospels written were those which contained the genealogies of our Lord, that is, Matthew and Luke. (Clement's comment is quoted by Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VI, 14, 5) Also, in Egypt, Origen (A.D. 185-255), one of the most learned men of antiquity, described both the names of the four Gospel writers and the order in which they wrote: first Matthew, then Mark, Luke and John. (Origen: In Jesu Nave {Homily}, VII, I)

Around the year 207, Tertullian (A.D. 160-223), writing from Pro-consular Africa against the heretic Marcion who recognized only the authority of the Gospel of Luke (because of its non-Hebrew origins), supports the value of all four Gospel writers, because Matthew and John were Apostles, and Luke and Mark were disciples of the Apostles. (*Adversus Marcionem*, 4, 2)

Thus, the codices furnish us with the names of the evangelists, and historical testimony supplies information concerning their identity. Matthew and John were disciples of Jesus, Mark was the disciple of Peter, an Apostle of Jesus, and Luke was the disciple of St. Paul.

Internal Evidence of Authorship

An internal examination of these Gospels permits us to enlarge somewhat upon this information. Matthew is expressly named in the list of the apostles reported in Mark (3:18), Luke (6:15), and Matthew (10:3). Matthew tells us that he was a publican (Mt 10:3) and then recounts his vocation to follow Jesus (Mt 9:9-13). Luke also speaks of this publican, calling him Levi (Lk 5:27); and Mark calls him the son of Alphaeus (Mk 2:14). These various facts complement each other. Matthew is also called Levi and he is the son of Alphaeus. Before following Jesus he was a tax collector and a man of good means. He was rich enough to offer a banquet for the master and his disciples (Matt. 9:9-13).

Mark, on the other hand, was not a disciple of Jesus, but a disciple of Peter, the prince of the Apostles. Papias, as we have already seen, speaks of Mark as the "disciple and interpreter" of Peter. When the Apostle Peter was preaching in Rome, he was obliged to make use of an interpreter. Mark served as Peter's interpreter. Peter himself, in his first letter written from Rome, affectionately refers to Mark as "my son" (1 Pet. 5:13). The presence of Mark in the eternal city is established also by St. Paul, who, in his letter to the Colossians, calls him "the cousin of Barnabas" (Col. 4:10). It is this same Mark whom Paul asked Timothy to bring to Rome, because he was so useful to Paul's ministry (2 Tim. 4:11). This helps us to understand why St. Paul refers to Mark as "his fellow-worker" (Philemon 24). In all probability he is the John Mark who accompanied the Apostle of the Gentiles to Cyprus on his first missionary journey (Acts 13: 1 ff.). The Acts of the Apostles presents him as the son of a woman named Maria (Mary), in whose home in Jerusalem Peter took refuge

after his miraculous delivery from prison in the year 42. We cannot exclude the possibility that he was converted and baptized by Peter. At any rate, Mark was a disciple of both Peter and Paul, but tradition prefers to call him simply the disciple of Peter.

The third evangelist is Luke, known through ancient Christianity as "the disciple of Paul". The anti-Marcionite prologue adds the information that he is a native of Antioch in Syria and a physician by profession (see Col. 4: 14 for substantiation). He is also held to be the author of the Acts of the Apostles, an opinion that is substantiated in the prologue of Acts, where he speaks of having already written a Gospel (Acts 1: 1). He was the companion of St. Paul and the eye-witness of the events he describes in the Acts by using the first person plural (the so-called "we-passages" - Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-16, 27:1-44, 28:1-15 and possibly 11:27). In his letters, St. Paul calls him the "beloved physician" (Col. 4:14) and speaks of him as being alone with Paul in Rome in his last imprisonment (2 Tim. 4:11). The Greek origin of the evangelist is substantiated by the style of his Gospel which shows him to be accomplished in the use of Greek.

The fourth Evangelist is John the Apostle, author of the Gospel which bears his name. This teaching of tradition is substantiated by an internal analysis of the Gospel: the writer makes frequent mention of a disciple whom Jesus loved, without ever revealing his identity. John, together with Andrew the brother of Peter, appears in the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel as a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:35-37). He rested his head on the Master's breast at the Last Supper (Jn 13:23) and followed his Master to Calvary on the day of the Crucifixion. Jesus also entrusted his Mother to his care (Jn 19:26-27). At the end of his Gospel he states explicitly that he has written what he has actually seen and that his testimony is true (Jn 21:24). The ageing John wrote the Gospel at the request of the presbyters at Ephesus who were eager to have a written form of the teaching of such a renowned authority as a measure to combat the heresies that were already beginning to develop.

Date of Composition

This information on the Gospels allows us to establish their date of composition. Notwithstanding certain divergencies in scholarly opinion, most experts today agree that the Synoptic Gospels were written before the year 70. Most probably Matthew composed his Gospel in Aramaic around the year 50. The original Aramaic text, however, has not survived. It was translated and reworked into Greek between the years 65-70 to meet the needs of the non-Jewish elements in the Christian community. At this time the Gospel of Mark was already in circulation. Mark's Gospel, in so far as it can be determined, was written in its present form around the year 65, after the death of Peter. Luke's Gospel was written probably between 60-70 A.D. Thus, by the year of the destruction of Jerusalem, the first three Gospels had already been widely circulated among the various Christian communities. John wrote his Gospel towards the end of the first century.

It is interesting to note how rationalist critics have, little by little, almost completely accepted the conclusions of Catholic scholarship which were based on tradition. De Grandmaison sums up the various opinions in the following outline: (L. de Grandmaison, *Jesus Christ*, Paris, 1928, p.118)

Strauss (1835) - at the very least, the year 150 A.D. for all three Gospels. Baur (1847) - Matthew, year 130-134; Mark, year 150; Luke, year 150. Renan (1877) - Matthew, year 84; Mark, year 76; Luke, year 94. Harnack (1911) - Matthew, year 70; Mark, year 65; Luke, year 67.

Place of Composition

We might also ask what was the place of composition for each of the Gospels. Here, too, the historical tradition of the primitive Church supplies the information. Eusebius, writing in the first decades of the fourth century, tells us that Matthew wrote his Gospel before leaving Palestine to evangelize other nations. He wrote in order to leave his fellow countrymen a record of his ministry among them, since they were not eager to see him depart. His book is thus almost an image of his own person. (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 24)

This testimony of Eusebius complements that of Papias and Irenaeus according to whom Matthew wrote "in the Hebrew dialect for the Hebrews". We can thus conclude, with reasonable probability, that the first Gospel was written in Palestine in Aramaic. It is only logical to suppose that the reworking and translation of the text into Greek was made in an Hellenistic atmosphere, although it would not be easy to say precisely where.

Eusebius and Irenaeus supply much information concerning the place of origin for the second Gospel. Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, stated that Matthew wrote while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome; and that Mark and Luke wrote after the death of the two Apostles. This leads us to conclude that Mark composed his Gospel at Rome. Eusebius is more explicit on the matter. Based on a source found in the Church of Alexandria, whose foundation tradition generally assigns to Mark, Eusebius reports that the second evangelist wrote his Gospel upon the request of the Romans who wanted to have a written record of Peter's preaching at Rome. (*Ibid.* II, 15)

Eusebius and Irenaeus are unanimous in asserting the Roman origin of the Gospel of Mark, even though they differ as to the date of composition, one assigning the writing to a time before the death of Peter, and the other only afterwards. Perhaps Irenaeus formulated his opinion on the basis of conjecture from the evidence presented by Papias, who believed that Mark wrote only after Peter had ceased to preach.

Ricciotti states that the Gospel of Luke received its "definitive form" in Rome, though the original may not have been written there. (Ricciotti, *Life of Christ*, p. 146) This can legitimately be deduced from the testimony of Irenaeus as reported above. Probably, the physician of Antioch began collecting the material for his writings in Greece and then put them into final form in Rome, where he was able to read Mark's Gospel, whose outline he largely follows.

John wrote his Gospel in Ephesus, or at least in some city of Asia Minor. This opinion is common to Christian antiquity.

We can thus conclude that the authenticity of the Gospels is a fact which does not permit any reasonable doubt. Both manuscript and historical tradition justify the conclusion that the authors of the four Gospels are actually the men to whom they are attributed. From the outset of our investigation, we can thus exclude this fundamental doubt.

The Gospels and Classical Historiography

In order to understand the importance of this conclusion, it is well to refer to the process of ancient historiography. Since the date of Christ's death is placed at 30 A.D. and the composition of the Synoptics at 70 A.D., we must note that the first mention of the existence of these books, that of Papias in 125, is only 55 years removed from their actual publication. It is interesting to observe that the great Greek historian Herodotus is first mentioned some 100 years after his death by Aristotle; the second to mention Herodotus is Cicero, some 400 years later. Cicero is the first to mention Thucydides, 300 years after his death. Caesar's Commentaries are spoken of by Plutarch

and Suetonius, 159 years after Caesar's death; and the Annals of Tacitus are not mentioned for some 200 years.

The number of codices and short span of time between the composition of the Gospels and the first mention of their authors place the question of their authenticity in a very privileged position with respect to ancient historiography.

Integrity of the Gospels

The question of authenticity leads to the question of integrity. Is the Gospel text as we read it today the same text that came from the pen of the Evangelist who wrote it, or has it been altered over the course of the centuries by interpolations, corruptions and omissions?

The problem is an essential one. A document which has not come down to us substantially as it was written by its original author, no matter how genuine it might seem to be in other respects, can hardly be admitted as an historical source. That is why modern scholars compile critical editions which undertake comparative examinations of the various codices and attempt to reconstruct the original archetype, just as it flowed from the pen of the inspired author. This is a laborious but indispensable work. Since there was no technique for mass printing, the scholars of antiquity were obliged to hand down their library of texts by successive transcriptions. In this work the copyist, either by distraction or for some other reason, could inadvertently be the cause of additions or omission. It is therefore absolutely necessary to reconstruct the text in its original purity. Such an undertaking is more apt to be successful if there are a great number of codices, and if they are ancient, i.e., as close to the time of original composition. The possibility of omissions and additions increases as the manuscript passes from one hand to another.

In the question of integrity, just as in the question of authenticity, the Gospels enjoy a privileged position with respect to the other authors of classical antiquity. The most ancient complete codex texts, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, date back to the fourth century; they are thus only 300 years removed from the time of original composition. We possess some 4,000 manuscripts transcribed between the fourth and ninth centuries. To this we must add the information that the discoveries of recent decades have brought to light some papyri containing some Gospel texts that date back prior to the fourth century. Among these we might mention the Rylands Papyrus, preserved in the Manchester Library, which contains some verses of chapter 18 of the Gospel of St. John. It dates back to the first half of the second century (around 150 A.D.).

Here once again a comparison with the other texts of antiquity demonstrates the privileged position of the Gospel texts. There is a 1400 year span between the writing of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, and Thucydides and the earliest known extant codex; the span is 1600 for Euripides and Catullus; 1300 for Plato; 1200 for Demosthenes; 700 for Terence. The most favoured text, in this respect, is that of Vergil, separated from its original by no more than 400 years. Thus we conclude that we cannot be as certain, in the case of any written text of classical antiquity, that we have a modern copy which represents the faithful handing down of the original, as we are in the case of the Gospels.

The objection might be made that there is an enormous number of variants in the Gospel. In such a case, how is it possible to have the true original text? The answer is that these variants do not effect the essential part of the text. This is the result arrived at by comparative analysis of the various manuscripts in an effort to reconstruct the original text. Amiot sums it up like this:

"In the totality of manuscripts, citations from the Fathers prior to the fourth century, and ancient versions, there are some 250,000 variants. The greater part of these are insignificant, since they concern only the spelling and order of words. According to Hort, seven-eighths of the text is beyond discussion. The variants that would change the text are only a thousandth part of the text itself; only about fifteen have any real importance; not one of them touches on the substance of any dogma which is established on the basis of critically certain texts without needing to fall back upon any dubious text." (Amiot, L'Evangile, p.450)

It is not difficult to explain the origin of these variants. In copying a manuscript, the copyist could easily change one word or letter to another, or he might even understand a word differently if he were writing from a dictation. A good number of variants is due to the ancient practice of citing Scripture from memory. Nor must we discount the attempts of heretics to incorporate their doctrines into the Gospel text.

We can thus be certain that we have a Gospel text that is in conformity with the original. If we have no valid reason to doubt the integrity of the work of Thucydides and Tacitus, even though we are dependent upon texts which date some 1400 years from the time of original composition, then we can hardly think of doubting the integrity of the Gospels, with a span of only 300 years between their original composition and the date of the first manuscripts.

Historicity

Finally, the most important question concerns the value of our Gospels. Are the Gospels documents worthy of belief? Do they really tell us about Christ's life, or are they merely the result of the faith of the early Christian community, with its particular visions and interests? Do the Gospels present a real portrait of Christ?

The answer to this question depends on our ability to demonstrate that the evangelists actually knew the facts and that they reported them accurately.

As to their knowledge of the facts, we can have no serious doubts. As a matter of fact, as we have pointed out, Mark came from Jerusalem, the setting for many of the episodes he tells us about and the home of many of the people who had personally witnessed these episodes. As the disciple of Peter he had contact with a man who lived with Jesus. No one could have a better knowledge of Jesus and what he taught and preached.

Luke does not have the same credentials as Mark. Luke, however, as Paul's disciple and travelling companion witnessed his preaching; and had the opportunity of visiting the Church at Antioch, (and spent a long time in Jerusalem and Palestine, see Acts 21:15 and 27:1). His firsthand acquaintance with the apostolic atmosphere puts Luke in a position of knowing what really went on. In the prologue to his Gospel, Luke says that he had taken great pains to inform himself of his material, from those who had been ministers of the Gospel from the very beginning.

Matthew, for his part, was a disciple of Jesus. In writing his Gospel in Aramaic, he cited things that he had personally and directly experienced. The Greek reworking and translation which we have today, enjoyed such authority throughout the ancient Church that its popularity can hardly be explained unless we admit that it was a faithful translation of the original. The Greek editor of Matthew's Gospel made use of Mark's Gospel, whose trustworthiness we have already established.

John's own words guarantee that he wrote down what he had seen and "touched". In his first letter, which many scholars hold to be an introduction for his Gospel, John has this to say: "that which was

from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also, to you, so that you may have fellowship with us" (1 John 1: 1-3). Even if his Gospel is spiritual, he knows that he is recounting events which actually happened, events for which he is an eyewitness (John 21:24).

The evangelists were well acquainted with the happenings they recount in their works. What Luke says of himself in the prologue to his Gospel can also be said of the others. Besides, the facts they narrate, like the miracles and the sayings of Jesus, were well geared to find a permanent place in their memories. Nothing so strikes our attention as what is surprising and unexpected.

Neither can the truthfulness of the evangelists be called into question. It is after all, a fundamental canon of historical criticism that no one lies without a reason. The evangelists certainly had no reason to lie. In preaching Christ they could look forward only to persecution, poverty, dishonour, and death. They were considered as scandalous traitors to their own nation because they preached a Messiah who spelled the end of Israel's political dreams of restoration. The pagans looked on them as fools (1 Cor. 1:23). A passage from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians tells the story of what he had to suffer in preaching the Gospel (2 Cor. 11:16-33).

On the other hand, even if the evangelists had wanted to lie, the circumstances of their times would not have allowed them to do so successfully. They wrote at a time when people who had seen and heard Christ were still alive.

Books of Devotion

The above observations on the knowledge and truthfulness of the evangelists seem perfectly clear. But there are very many factors which determine the veracity of a writer. First of all we must keep in mind that the Gospels were not written for a purely historical purpose, but for motives of devotion. In committing the life and teaching of Christ to writing, the evangelists were primarily interested in furnishing the faithful with a document of edification to nourish piety and promote the love of Christ. Then is it not possible that their avowed intentions might not have led them, unconsciously, to present an image of Christ that was adapted to the circumstances and purged of everything that would not edify? Is it not possible to conclude that in the Gospels we meet the Christ of faith, and not the Christ in history?

This objection does have some foundation in fact. Anyone familiar with hagiographical literature, the lives of the saints, written simply for reasons of edification, knows how easy it is for authors to pass over personal defects and to exaggerate virtues. Fortunately, the modern hagiographer takes a different approach, which stresses the humanity that had to be sacrificed to attain the more ethereal concepts of Christian perfection.

This objection, however, does not detract from the historicity of the Gospels. It is certainly quite possible to contribute to the piety and devotion and still remain perfectly faithful to fact. The evangelists themselves assure us that this was their objective. Luke, in his prologue, says that he examined all his sources most thoroughly (Lk 1:3); and John says that he wrote what he had seen and that his witness is true (John 19:35). This attention to exact detail is found in the writings of the other Apostles as well. St. Paul bids Timothy to be attentive because these are not idle stories that are being taught (1 Tim. 1:4), and St. Peter is no less explicit: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we

were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16). These references make it clear that critical sense was not unknown to the preachers of the Gospel.

We might also add that this purpose of edification is actually a motive for believing in the historical exactness of the Gospels. Unlike ordinary biographers, who attempt to contribute to the reader's edification by exaggeration, the evangelists are dealing with a person whom they recognize as the Son of God. This conviction makes them see Jesus as the perfect man. His acts and words take on a divine worth and meaning. The evangelists' task is to describe Jesus' words and deeds as exactly as they can. The mentality and preoccupation of the evangelists differ from that of the hagiographers. The hagiographer tends to idealize his subject, while the evangelist tends to faithfully reproduce his subject which is perfection itself. This preoccupation with exactness explains why the evangelists included certain episodes from the life of the Master which seemed to compromise Jesus' prestige and personality. For example, Jesus seems to be lacking in gentleness and patience when he drove the money changers out of the temple (John 2:14-17); or the destruction caused when Jesus drove the evil spirits into the herd of swine (Matt. 8:30-34). The Gospels also state that Jesus' enemies thought he was possessed by the evil spirit (John 7:20), and even his relatives thought he was "beside himself" (Mark 3:21).

Jesus is not an Idealized Figure

A further objection may be made. It is a fact that a body of legend and myth often grows up around great historical personalities. Little by little, the idealized figure tends to lose his real dimension. This has happened to a good number of historical and religious personages. Might we not legitimately expect that the Jesus presented in the Gospels fell prey to the same idealistic tendencies?

There is a foundation for this objection. It is true that famous personages easily give rise to myth and legend. The person of Jesus does not escape this human tendency.

In the second century, when the canonical Gospels (Footnote: The canonical Gospels are the ones we know today; they are so named from the catalogue of books which the Church recognizes as sacred, the so-called "canon".) were already written and circulating among the faithful, a literature of legends and myths grew up among the faithful regarding the person and teachings of Christ and his Apostles. Some of this literature is referred to as the Apocryphal Gospels. Many of the imaginary reconstructions attempt to fill gaps in the canonical Gospels. For example, the canonical Gospels give very little information concerning Jesus prior to his public life. The apocryphal versions, however, have filled Jesus' hidden life with a number of miracle stories. In one of these accounts we read that the seven year old Jesus, while playing with the neighbourhood children, moulded birds out of clay. When the other boys began bragging about their models, Jesus told the other boys that he was going to command his birds to fly. The birds became alive and flew away.

In such cases we are dealing with fantasy, and that is why the Church rejects the apocryphal gospels. This goes to demonstrate that scientific criticism was not unknown in early Christianity. We might question further: if the Church becomes critical in the second century, might we not suspect it was an effort to end the free range of fantasy that had been already incorporated in the canonical Gospels? The answer is negative. Some considerations will convince us of this.

First of all, the evangelists or the first faithful take full account of the weaknesses of Christ and leave us a detailed description of his sufferings. Frequently they tell how he was put to flight by his enemies, how he was treated like a drunkard, a possessed man, a madman, etc. If the process of

idealization consists in carefully removing every shadow of defect from the personality described, why do we see no evidence of this in the Gospel narratives? We might point out that this is a question of the greatest and most formidable of all idealization, because it involves nothing less than the transformation of a man into God. Can we imagine a god who would flee before his enemies, who would refuse to defend himself against the soldiers who arrested him, who would submit to crucifixion between two thieves?

To this consideration we might well add another: works of imagination and fantasy indulge in the spectacular. The evangelists, however, describe with sobriety the incarnation, birth, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Yet, each of these episodes presents the raw material for the most imaginative reconstruction. In fact, the Christians were criticized for their moderation in presenting Christ.

In particular, Celsus, a bitter antagonist of Christianity (as early as 150) asked why Christ had never appeared to his enemies, if he was truly risen from the dead. This idea is so completely human that we are surprised to find it missing in the Gospels.

The Birth of Christ and the Birth of Buddha

A comparison will bear out this observation even more forcefully. The difference between imaginative writing and the Gospels is marked. This is how the Lalita Vistara recounts the birth of Buddha:

"Then Maya-Devi, surrounded by 84,000 chariots drawn by horses, 84,000 chariots hitched to elephants, adorned with ornaments of every kind, protected by an army of 84,000 soldiers of heroic courage, handsome and well built, armed with shield and cuirass, preceded by 60,000 women of Kakya, protected by 40,000 members of the household of Kuddhodana on his father's side, old, young, and mature age alike, surrounded by 60,000 members of the inner circle of King Kuddhodana's court, singing and producing a symphony of all manner of musical instruments, surrounded by 80,000 daughters of Naga, 80,000 daughters of Gandhavar, 80,000 daughters of Kinnara, 80,000 daughters of Asura, after completing all manner of preparations and making ready all manner of adornment, singing songs and making all manner of acclamation... followed (by this great retinue) the Queen came out of the palace. The whole garden of Lumbini, flowing with perfumed waters, was filled with divine flowers; and all the trees, the most beautiful of the garden, although it was not the time of year for it, were decked in leaf and fruit... The garden was perfectly adorned by the gods just as the garden of Mikraka is perfectly adorned by the gods.

"Then Maya-Devi, entering the garden of Lumbini and leaving her magnificent Chariot, surrounded by the daughters of men and gods, went from one tree to the other, from one woods to the other, looking at all the trees one after the other, until she came to this Plakcha, the most precious among all the precious trees, with its finely balanced crown of branches, rich with beautiful leaves and gems, all covered with the flowers of gods and men, exhaling the sweetest aroma from its branches which were decked in raiment of the most beautiful hues, sparkling in the manifold lustre and gleam of a thousand precious stones, completely covered with every manner of jewel from root to trunk and branches and leaves, those large and well balanced and symmetrical branches, while the ground was all covered with a tapestry of grass green as a peacock's tail and soft to the touch... (This tree) beautiful and without blemish... she now approached.

"Suddenly this tree, through the power of Bodhisattva, bent down in salutation; then Maya-Devi, stretching out her right arm like a lightning bolt that furrows its way across the sky, then taking a branch of the tree, as a sign of blessing, and looking to the distant horizon of the sky, and yawning,

remained motionless. At that moment, the 60,000 Aspsara, drawing close to serve her, formed an honorary escort. Accompanied by a like supernatural power, Bodhisattva entered into his mother's womb. At the end of ten full months he issued from his mother's side, endowed with memory and knowledge, without ever having been touched by the impurity of his mother's womb, a thing that cannot be said of any other person. At that same moment, Kakra, Lord of the gods, and Brahma, Lord of Saha, were standing before him. They both made a bow of the most profound reverence and, recognizing within his body and the parts of his body the presence of Bodhisattva arrayed in a divine raiment of Kaki, they took him into their arms. And the palace in which Bodhisattva had been while in his mother's womb, was taken by Brahma the Lord of Saha and the sons of the gods Brahmakayika and transported into the world of Brahma... Bodhisattva was thus not touched by any human being; it was the gods themselves who first received him..."

This is how Jesus' birth is reported in the third Gospel:

"And while they were there the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:6-7).

The difference between the two accounts is striking: there is the same contrast as there is between history and legend, truth and fantasy. The words of Rousseau might well apply to the Gospel account: "Something made up is not like this". (Emile, IV)

For the narrative of the Lalita Vistara we might say the opposite: something made up sounds like this.

The Absolute Newness of Christ

The impossibility of idealization of the historical Christ, such as he was seen and encountered by his apostles, appears even more evident if we consider the atmosphere in which he lived and worked. The great novelty of Christ in the history of religion is that he presented himself to humanity as God and man at one and the same time; as a person in which two natures existed, divine and human. This is what Karl Adam has to say: "In the whole history of religion there is no parallel for such a faith which believes in the integral humanity of the Son of God. In those religions in which we frequently encounter divinization, we always find that the human element is absorbed by the divine and disappears in it". (Karl Adam, Jesus Christ) Thus, for example, Antinous, the favourite of the Emperor Hadrian, was worshipped as transformed into Osiris. Pagan mythology is familiar with many cases of human divinization, in which men lose their human personality and take on a divine one. We know of no case in which a man is divinized while remaining human. Christ, on the contrary, is both perfect God and perfect man.

Karl Adam goes on to say that the God who is joined to this humanity, is not, for the Christian, just one God among the many gods and goddesses. This God, who is Christ in union with Father and Holy Spirit, is the Only God, the one God of heaven and earth. The one and only God of the Old Testament is present here, in this man, who is the Son of God upon earth. In no other setting in the history of religion can we find this one and only God and this one and only Christ. In this Christian concept, we recognize the second characteristic trait which distinguishes it from all supposed parallels which are claimed to exist in the history of religion.

In pagan myth, we find examples of gods who have become men. But these are always secondary gods, subject to fate and destiny, never the one and only God.

Nor was Judaism, rooted as it was in the concept of the uniqueness of its God, any more in a position to contribute to the idealization of Christ. The Old Testament is filled with the conviction of God's uniqueness. In order to preserve this conviction in the minds of the Jews who lived in daily contact with pagan polytheism, the Book of Deuteronomy forbade the cult of idols. In this strictly monotheistic mentality, it is impossible to make a man into the Son of God, equal in all things to God; and therefore equally deserving of worship. St. Paul, in keeping with Jewish mentality, affirms that Christ is a scandal for the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23). We can well imagine the great difficulty the Jewish people had in admitting that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus himself, for that matter, in perfect sympathy with this difficulty, blessed the man who would not be scandalized in him (Matt. 11:6) and said it was a gift of the Father to be able to recognize the Son of God (Matt. 16:17).

How then, in an atmosphere filled with the conviction of God's uniqueness, was it possible to achieve the idealization of a man to the point of making him into God Incarnate? Particularly difficult was it, when the man in question was put to death by a punishment reserved for slaves. What is more, this idealization would necessarily have to take place primarily in the Jewish world, to which all the apostles and the majority of the early Christians belonged.

The Greek world presented gods who were subject to a cycle of death and rebirth. But these were legendary figures, lost in the distant past. Jesus is the Son of God made man, not by the force of some hostile destiny which he could not escape, but voluntarily, out of love for man - to save man from sin and teach him the ways of salvation. Moreover, Jesus is a perfectly historical figure, seen and touched by thousands of people. Karl Adam concludes that neither the Jews nor the Greeks, left to their own resources, could ever arrive at the figure of Christ which shines out so brilliantly in the Gospels. The theory which seeks to establish Christ's origin in the creative powers of the Christian community of faith turns out to be, from the historical point of view, false and deceptive.

Judgement of Rousseau and Goethe

As a conclusion to our discussion on the historicity of the Gospels, it might be useful to quote the judgement of two important and well known writers. Rousseau when asked if the Gospel story is arbitrarily invented, answered: My friend, something made up does not sound like this; and the facts of Socrates' life, which no one seriously doubts, are less well attested to than those of Jesus Christ". (Emile, IV)

All we can do is to rephrase the problem without solving it; it is more inconceivable that a handful of men should have got together to produce this book than it is to admit that its subject was furnished by only one man. Never did the Jewish authors achieve such tone or such morality; the Gospel enjoys such great, obvious and absolutely inimitable marks of truth that the man who made it up would be more astounding than the Person about whom he writes.

This is what Goethe has to say: "I hold the Gospels to be absolutely authentic. They are like a reflection of the person of Christ, a reflection that is sublime and more divine in character than anything that has ever appeared on earth. I bow before them as before the divine manifestation of the loftiest principle of morality." (Eckermann, Conversation with Goethe, III)

We can thus trust our Gospels; we can read them, convinced that they represent the person of Christ as he actually was, as he was seen and encountered by his friends and enemies. The Gospels are historical books, the most historical books of antiquity, and their truthfulness is sealed by the blood of their authors. Pascal said that he did not find it difficult to believe in the truth or authenticity of a story for which its witnesses had to face death. (Pascal: Pensees, 28)

The Gospels may indeed be used as our primary source in examining the proof for the divinity of Christ:

"These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name". (John 20:31)

EPILOGUE

St. John's Testimony

The apostle John narrated events of which he had clearly been an eye-witness: "When they came to Jesus, they found he was already dead, and so instead of breaking his legs one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water. This is the evidence of one who saw it - trustworthy evidence, and he knows that he speaks the truth - and he gives it so that you also may believe". (John 19:33-35)

St. Justin Martyr: Official Confirmation

Writing to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius, around A.D. 150, St. Justin Martyr in his "Defence of the Christians" (Book 1, cc. 35 & 50) confirms the facts narrated by the evangelists concerning the death of Christ by appealing to the official archives of the Roman Empire:

"The passage 'they pierced my hands and my feet' (which I have just indicated to your Majesty) was the foretelling by the prophet of the nailing of his hands and his feet on the cross. After they had crucified him, those who had the carrying out of the deed cast lots for his clothing, and divided it among themselves. That all this really happened as I have described it, Your Majesty can read for yourself, in the official annals compiled under Pontius Pilate... After he had been crucified even his disciples all fell away from him. But then he appeared to them, living again, who had been dead, and taught them the meaning of all the things which had been written in the prophets concerning him. Then finally they looked upon him as he ascended into heaven; they saw, and they believed. They received the power he had promised to send them, and went out to all manner of men. They taught all these things, and were known by the name of apostles".
