

## The Reliability of the Gospels - 7

# When they were Written

The reliability of the Gospels is a vital issue for real Christianity. If the Gospels are reliable records of Jesus Christ, we can trust what they say about him. If they are not, then there are serious problems for those who attempt to follow his teaching. Crucial to the question of the reliability of the Gospels is the date at which they were written.

If the Gospels were written in the second century AD, then there is a possibility that the information they carry has been altered by a chain of transmission and that some elements are simply invented. But if they were written in the lifetime of eyewitnesses there would be no possibility of false information being incorporated into them, because the witnesses would detect this and expose it.

Remember that the eyewitnesses were not only the disciples of Jesus. Great crowds came to hear Jesus' teaching and to see him heal; and among these were scribes, Sadducees and Pharisees, people who would delight in finding errors in the Gospel records.

### Types of Evidence

The first evidence about the date of the Gospels is external, and comes from the accuracy of the descriptions when compared with archaeology. In 66 AD a war broke out between Jewish rebels and the Romans. This reached a blood-soaked climax in 70 AD when Jerusalem was stormed and razed to the ground. The Gospels' accurate descriptions of places in Jerusalem, or

of customs, was only possible because the Gospels were written before, or soon after, the Jewish war.

But there are details within the New Testament which show an early date of writing. By comparing the letters of Paul in the New Testament with the account in the Acts of the Apostles one can calculate the date of these letters, often to within a month or two. The same comparison provides a date for Acts.

### Luke

Acts 28:30 tells us that Paul lived in Rome for two years – this takes us to the very early spring of 62 AD. The book then ends with no significant event. There can be only one reason to finish the book at this point without any specific event to end on; that is that this is the time at which Acts was completed. This means that Acts was completed in early 62 AD. Acts 1:1 refers to the other of Luke's books, the Gospel, as having already been completed. This means that Luke must also have been completed before 62 AD, probably at least one year previously.

The date of Luke can be confirmed by a look at 1 Timothy. Here we read:

*For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The labourer is worthy of his wages" (1 Timothy 5:18).*

The second saying, "The labourer is worthy of his wages" is a direct quotation from Luke 10:7. As 2 Timothy was

written in late 62 AD, we can conclude that the Gospel of Luke must have been written before this.

## **John**

The Gospel of John contains many accurate descriptions of customs and places from before 70 AD. One is a description of the Pool of Bethesda:

*Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches (John 5:2).*

The point here is that this is in the present tense. The pool of Bethesda was still standing when John's Gospel was written. This means that John's Gospel was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

## **Matthew**

Matthew provides a similar text:

*That field has been called the Field of Blood to this day (Matthew 27:8).*

When Matthew's Gospel was written people knew the names of fields near Jerusalem. In 70 AD the field boundaries would be obliterated and the survivors of the population were deported as slaves and sold throughout the Roman Empire. The memory of the names of plots of land would have been soon forgotten. Matthew's Gospel was also written before 70 AD.

## **Mark**

There are several passages in Paul's letters which possibly allude to Mark's Gospel. One example is where Paul is writing about marriage to believers:

*Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband (1 Corinthians 7:10).*

Jesus spoke about divorce on several different occasions, but only Mark's Gospel contains a saying about a wife leaving her husband (Mark 10:12). Other references to the words of Jesus seem to allude to sayings recorded in the Gospel of Mark. This implies that the Gospel of Mark was available to the Corinthians when the letter was written.

1 Corinthians was written between Passover and Pentecost in 55 AD. Mark seems to have a strong association with the Apostle Peter, who was probably the main source for the accounts in the Gospel. Tracking the movements of Peter and Mark, it is unlikely that the Gospel of Mark was written much before 50 AD. This gives a date for Mark's Gospel between 50 and 55 AD.

## **Conclusion**

The Gospels were all written well within 40 years of the events they describe. Not only were the Apostles alive to write them, but the opponents of Jesus were alive as well. The fact of an early date, coupled with the existence of many witnesses tells us that the Gospels are reliable. Hostile witnesses would have loved to have been able to say that the Gospels were inaccurate but they could never do so. There are no attacks on inaccuracies in the Gospels in early writings.

A full review of New Testament dates can be found in the 'Date of Writing' section at [www.biblethink.org.uk](http://www.biblethink.org.uk).

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