

Jesus is Dead

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Easter Fictions

Enter and Exit the Apologist

For some dozen years I was a born-again Christian. I did quite a lot of personal witnessing, and eventually I studied apologetics as an aid to evangelism. I knew I could not “argue” anyone into the kingdom of God, but if I were well-prepared, I hoped I might help unbelievers get past certain questions that were keeping them from faith. How could I expect them to accept Christ as their savior if it were an open question whether Christ even existed? And so on. I was active in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, where I devoured the works of many Christian apologists, most of them centering upon New Testament issues, mainly the historical Jesus. I read everything I could get my hands on by John Warwick Montgomery (*History and Christianity* [1964], F.F. Bruce (*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* [1960], J.N.D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* [1969] and *The Evidence for the Resurrection* [1966]), Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Jesus, Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates, Muhammad* [1972]), Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* [1930]), Ralph P. Martin (*Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* [1972]), I. Howard Marshall (*Luke: Historian and Theologian* [1970]), Josh McDowell (*Evidence That Demands a Verdict* [1972] and *More Evidence That Demands a Verdict* [1975]), and others.

These writers compose a mixed bag. Bruce, Martin, and Marshall were all genuine New Testament scholars, but they were half-apologists, what James Barr (in his amazingly insightful book, *Fundamentalism*, 1976) called “maximal conservatives.” They functioned within a certain ecclesiastical-academic world in which the traditional seemed always the most plausible. Any theory outside of certain parameters just could not seem worthwhile to them. Thus, while seeming to employ critical arguments and axioms, they always, in virtually every case, arrived at “safe” conclusions comfortable for orthodoxy. Anderson and Montgomery, though very well read in history and theology, were primarily legal scholars, and they disdained

what seemed to them the excessively skeptical procedures of professional New Testament specialists. This put them in the odd position of claiming, precisely as outsiders to the field, to know better than the insiders, a stance that comes in quite handy in apologetics, as when a Chiropractor praises himself as being “independent of the medical establishment.” Morison and McDowell were just hacks, Morison a very imaginative one, McDowell a jack-of-all-trades who mainly amassed research done by students and organized it into syllabi of paragraph-length notes and quotes. Reading the works of all these men, I learned much, some of it valid.

As years went by and I augmented what I read from them with my own research, I came to be amazed again and again to discover major items of relevant information, even whole aspects of crucial questions, that I would never have been aware of had I rested satisfied with my old guiding lights. I could not imagine they could have been ignorant of many cases and parallels that simply shattered their arguments. And as I eventually read the works of the critics and skeptics whom the apologists and maximal conservatives so eloquently refuted, I realized their arguments had not been treated fairly or representatively.

Upon my college graduation, I enrolled at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, where I had the privilege of studying with evangelical New Testament scholars David M. Scholer (*A Basic Bibliographic Guide for New Testament Exegesis* [1973]; *Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 1948-1969*; *Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 1970-1994* [both 1997], *Women in Ministry* [1987]), Gordon D. Fee (commentaries on the Corinthian, Philippian, and Pastoral Epistles; *Gospel and Spirit* [1991], *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* [1996]), Andrew T. Lincoln (commentaries on Ephesians and John), and J. Ramsey Michaels (*Servant and Son: Jesus in Parable and Gospel* [1982], commentaries on Revelation, John, and 1 Peter). These men were all quite conservative, though in some ways progressive, and all genuine scholars.

I recall the last course I took at Gordon-Conwell, an exciting, high-level seminar taught by all four of these professors, called “New Testament Canon and Hermeneutics.” As I weighed their sophisticated and fine-tuned reasonings, I remember being impressed with what a fragile mind-game it all was. Even as

believers in the supernatural, they were all too cognizant of the great distance that lay between the first century and our own, and the conceptual bridges they sought to build dwarfed the Bridge over the River Kwai. It was such a house of cards, such a stretch getting from the supposedly inspired and authoritative texts of the apostles to theological assertions or ethics today, that I realized a sophisticated evangelicalism was in one sense a contradiction in terms. The learned professors wanted badly to preach the Bible with the note of authority they were accustomed to from their church backgrounds. But they knew it was not so simple, and as a result their efforts were aimed at working their way back to simplicity by a complex and twisted path. Just as the maximal conservative New Testament historian really wishes the Higher Criticism did not exist and essentially spends his time trying to turn the clock back and neutralize the results of real criticism, so does the evangelical hermeneut try to justify with appeals to Wittgenstein and Polyani the simplistic stance which criticism properly renders impossible.

You know by now that these studies wound up having the last result I ever would have anticipated. I came to the end of my evangelical faith, abandoning belief in the authority of the Bible and the resurrection of Jesus. How did this happen? It all comes down to this: I learned from evangelical Christianity a love for the exegesis of scripture above all things. I learned what I still believe: that it is an intellectual sin to fudge the meaning of the text, to stretch it to mean what you want it to mean. Thus I forswore the harmonizations used by apologists to keep the Bible sounding inerrant and authoritative. I concluded that my faith must in the end be sacrificed to keep myself honest with the text. Otherwise, if I twisted the text for the sake of my faith, what could my faith possibly be worth?

Literature, not History

It is for the sake of understanding the New Testament as accurately as I can that I have learned to read the gospel resurrection accounts as the products of legend and of creative redaction by the gospel writers. I love these texts. I do not

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mean to attack them, only to get them straight in my mind, to apprehend them as accurately and realistically as I can. And to believe, as I used to, that they are historical reportage now seems to me an implausible way of reading them. It is a reading in the service of a dogmatic agenda, one I used to hold myself. My conclusion has nothing to do with any so-called “naturalistic presuppositions,” for I hold none. I gladly acknowledge that there must be far more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy.

Apologists often admit that the gospel resurrection narratives seem to contradict one another. They go on to suggest possible ways in which all the details might be salvaged, combined in some great, synoptic mosaic. But these efforts strike me as no more plausible than Harold Lindsell’s attempts to have Peter deny Jesus six times. Worse, they miss the point. The contradictions are not flies in the ointment; they are clues to a mystery. They do not so much spoil the evidence of the texts; instead, they are crucial evidence for understanding the texts. As Warfield might have said, they are *indicia*, pointers to the fictive character of the texts. Here’s what I mean.

Mark 16:1-8, the earliest version of the Easter story, features the discovery of the empty tomb and the interpretive words of a young man, perhaps an angel. He announces that the absence of the body means that Jesus has risen. His words anticipate an appearance of Jesus, but none is offered. In the oldest and best manuscripts, Mark’s gospel ends right there. (Some time later, used to reading the fuller accounts of Matthew and Luke, which extend beyond the empty tomb, some scribe added Mark 16:9-20, in which Jesus does appear to this and that disciple after all. Independently, someone else supplied yet a different, much shorter, ending for Mark’s gospel.)

By itself, as Charles Talbert has shown, the empty tomb story looks so much like other ancient “apotheosis” narratives, *e.g.*, of Apollonius, Empedocles, Romulus, Hercules, *etc.*, that it seems to me special pleading to insist that Mark’s is however not one more of these legends but rather a report of historical fact. Here is another:

Heracles sent Licymnius and Iolaus to Delphi to ask Apollo what he should do about the sickness [caused by the poison his wife had put on his shirt, thinking it was a love charm].

The god replied through an oracle that Heracles should be brought along with his armor to Oete and that a giant pyre should be prepared. The god stated that what followed should be up to Zeus. When Iolaus and his companions had carried out these commands, they withdrew to a distance to see what would happen. Heracles, given up hope for himself, went to the pyre and asked everyone coming up to him to light it. No one dared to obey him except Philoctetes. Having received the gift of Heracles' bow in return for this service, he lit the pyre. Immediately lightning bolts fell all around, and the entire pyre was consumed in flames. After this, Iolaus and his companions came to collect the bones, but they did not find a single bone. They supposed that Heracles in accordance with the oracle had passed from men to the gods. (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 4:38:4-5).

Matthew and Luke, both using Mark as their basis, jump off the diving board provided by Mark 16:1-8, but they jump in different directions. Especially since each evangelist's continuation bears ample marks of that writer's distinctive style and vocabulary, the most natural inference would be that each is making it up as he goes along. Similarly, various writers have tried their hand at finishing Dickens' fragment *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. No one would take a second author's attempt to continue the abrupt work of the first to be historical fact. The very nature of the enterprise shows the whole to be fiction. Matthew and Luke are, so to speak, each taking a crack at finishing *Edwin Drood*. They are writing fiction.

Matthew has altered Mark's unseemly ending so that the fleeing women obey the charge of the angel at the tomb. And he adds a sudden appearance of the Risen Jesus to the same women. But this Jesus merely repeats the charge the angel gave them, which implies that the Jesus episode is Matthew's doubling of Mark's young man episode. I think it likely that in this way Matthew sought to clear up the ambiguity left by Mark's description of the "young man" — who was he? An angel? Or Jesus himself? Matthew decided to cover both bases, so he divides the scene between an angel and Jesus, having them both bear essentially the same tidings.

The appearance on the Galilean hilltop is scarcely a story at all, but the barest narrative frame for a Matthean speech, betrayed by his distinctive vocabulary, "to

disciple,” “till the consummation of the age.” Jesus, risen or not, can scarcely have given such a forthright “Great Commission,” or the uproar over Peter’s visit to Cornelius is simply impossible to explain. Here we see two passages in direct conflict. In Acts chapter 10 (repeated almost verbatim in chapter 11!) we read how Simon Peter is unwilling to preach the gospel to “unclean” Gentiles, apparently because it would entail sharing meals with them, and that would present the risk of accepting non-kosher food. In a vision, the Holy Spirit assures him that henceforth all foods are kosher, and immediately he receives messengers from a Roman centurion, Cornelius, inviting Peter to come and preach in his home. Forewarned by the vision, he agrees to go. As he preaches, the Spirit fills all present, and even the Gentiles begin to speak in tongues, God himself endorsing the reality of their faith. Word of this gets back to Jerusalem, and the elders there call Peter on the carpet: what on earth can he have been thinking, preaching to Gentiles? A new chapter of Christian expansion thus opens. Now somebody please explain how any of this would have been either possible or necessary if the parting words of the resurrected Son of God had been: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19)?

If Jesus had given such marching orders to his disciples, whence Peter’s initial reluctance? Whence that of the Jerusalem elders? And why should Luke have needed to tell the story in Acts to convince readers? It is obvious that Luke’s story of Peter’s vision and Matthew’s story of Jesus issuing the Great Commission are independent attempts to do the same thing: to win ancient Christians over to supporting the gentile Mission. We err in viewing either episode as history. Matthew 28 is not a report of what Jesus said to his disciples; surely it makes much better sense as a send-off by Matthew himself to those for whom he compiled the gospel, his missionaries to the Gentiles. It is they who know they must take this digest of teaching and relay it to the nations.

The business about the guards at the tomb is pure comedy: imagine them trying to get anyone to believe they knew the disciples stole the body when by their own account they were asleep at the time! Not even Sergeant Schultz on *Hogan’s Heroes*

would resort to such an excuse! And if Jesus had actually exited the tomb despite a cordon of armed soldiers, is it in any way possible to imagine that any other accounts of the event would have omitted it? Were Mark, Luke, and John just economizing on ink? Was this “detail” unworthy of their notice? You just are asking not to be taken seriously if you say, “Oh, it happened all right; the other writers just didn’t happen to include it!” Let us rather account for the distinctiveness of Matthew’s version by admitting that he embroidered and embellished his story, as he did also at the crucifixion account, where the death of Jesus prompts a mass resurrection of the saints who then appear in Jerusalem, all unnoticed by any other gospel.

What has Luke done, faced with Mark’s seemingly washed-out bridge? He, too, has the women obey the angel — or rather the two men. Mark and Matthew had only one each. Again, let us not emulate the O. J. Simpson defense team, the Clinton spin-doctors, by suggesting that there were actually two men or angels but that Matthew just didn’t happen to see one because the other was fatter and in front of him, or one was on a coffee break when Mark got there. Let’s be honest with the text. There weren’t “actually” two, with Matthew and Mark choosing only one to mention. No, the truth is that Luke decided the story would read better if there were two heavenly spokesmen, just like the two men he has talking with Jesus at the Transfiguration and again with the Twelve at the ascension. Remember, the same author has the ascension itself occur on Easter Day in his gospel and forty days later in Acts. He simply cannot have been trying to report history in the first place. Luke was not an incompetent historian; he was a very competent creative writer!

Why does Luke’s speech of the two men at the tomb differ from that in Mark? Mark had the man say, “Go to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.” Luke has changed this to “Remember how when he was in Galilee he told you the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of men,” *etc.* Luke wants salvation history to proceed from Jerusalem; thus his appearances happen in and around Jerusalem. He has simply lopped off the Galilean appearance Mark implied but neglected to narrate. He has the men at the tomb say what he knows no one actually said on that morning. It is not a question of that.

This is a writer creatively rewriting a story. He has decided, for the sake of his story's flow, to exclude Galilean appearances, and it is to obscure Luke's theological agenda for apologists to pretend to harmonize him with Matthew by intercalating Matthew 28 in between Luke 24 and Acts 1. I am interested in what Matthew said, and in what Luke said. I am not interested in replacing them with some composite *Life of Christ in Stereo*.

The wonderful story of Jesus appearing to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–32), again, belongs to a certain legendary subgenre, that of the pious who 'entertain angels unaware.' One could point to Zeus and Hermes visiting Baucis and Philemon and various others, but the closest is a story, recorded four centuries before Luke, from the healing shrine of Asclepius at Epidaurus. A woman named Sostrata journeys to the holy site to be delivered of a dangerously long pregnancy. There she expects to have a dream of the savior who will tell her what to do. But nothing happens. Disappointed, she and her companions head for home again. Along the way they are joined by a mysterious stranger who asks the cause of their grief. Hearing her story, he bids them lay her stretcher down, and he cures her of what turns out to be a false pregnancy. Then he reveals his identity as Asclepius himself and is gone. It is not impossible that Luke borrowed the story, but that is not my point. The Emmaus story is recognizable as another tale of the same type. Why should we insist that the one is a legend but the other is historical?

The sudden appearance (Luke 24:36ff) of the Risen Jesus among the dumbfounded disciples provides some of the favorite ammunition for apologists. In this episode, Jesus suddenly pops into the midst of a meeting of the Eleven and others. Everyone thinks he is a ghost, but he shows his hands and feet to prove he is flesh and bones. Many remaining unconvinced, he eats some fish they have cooked to prove his corporeality.

We are told that the resurrection appearances must not have been subjective hallucinations because, in stories like this one those who saw him were initially skeptical and had to be convinced despite their doubts. But this is to assume we are reading a direct transcript of a scene that actually happened and are trying to decide if it represents a hallucination or

something else. If it represents a genuine event in the lives of the disciples, then it cannot have been a hallucination: wishful thinking produces hallucinations, and wishful thinking is hardly compatible with doubt.

But this approach strategically ignores the fact that such skepticism is a stock feature of miracle stories in general. The skepticism of the bystanders occurs again and again as a device to increase the suspense, to heighten the odds against which the wonder will seem all the greater. “How are we to feed all these people?” “Master, do you not care if we perish?” “She is not dead but sleepeth, and they laughed him to scorn.” Asclepius restored the sight of a blind man who had an empty eye socket, despite the skeptical jeering of the crowd. Another man with a withered hand himself doubted the god could cure him, but he did, and Asclepius told him he must henceforth bear the nickname “Incredulous.” The key is to see that the skepticism is simply a narrative device. The key to what? To understanding the text as what it is, not what it is not. It is literary, not historical.

As for John, he has put his own spin on the story of Jesus appearing amid the disciples in order to conform it to his private story of the spear-thrust. His Doubting Thomas story is cut from the same legendary cloth as its counterpart in Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*:

The young man in question ... would on no account allow the immortality of the soul, and said, “I myself, gentlemen, have done nothing now for nine months but pray to Apollonius that he would reveal to me the truth about the soul; but he is so utterly dead that he will not appear to me in response to my entreaties, nor give me any reason to consider him immortal.” Such were the young man’s words on that occasion, but on the fifth day following, after discussing the same subject, he fell asleep where he was talking with them, and ... on a sudden, like one possessed, he leaped up, still in a half sleep, streaming with perspiration, and cried out, “I believe thee.” And when those who were present asked him what was the matter; “Do you not see,” said he, “Apollonius the sage, how that he is present with us and is listening to our discussion, and is reciting wondrous verses about the soul?” “But where is he?” they asked, “For we cannot see him anywhere, although we would rather do so than possess all the blessings

of mankind.” And the youth replied: “It would seem that he is come to converse with myself alone concerning the tenets which I would not believe.” (*Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 8:31. Conybeare trans., Loeb ed., Vol. II. pp. 403, 404)

The miraculous catch of fish story (not even a resurrection story in Luke 5) seems to be borrowed from a Pythagoras story in which the exact number of the netted fish actually made some difference.

At that time he was going from Sybaris to Krotona. At the shore, he stood with me fishing with nets; they were still hauling the nets weighed down (with fish) from the depths. He said he knew the number of fish that they had hauled in. The men agreed to do what he ordered, if the number of fish was as he said. He ordered the fish to be set free, living, after they were counted accurately. What is more astonishing, in the time they were out of the water being counted, none of the fish died while he stood there. He paid them the price of the fish and went to Krotona. They announced the deed everywhere, having learned his name from some children. (Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, 36, 60f)

What does all this give us? My point is not to ‘debunk’ the resurrection narratives as false witnesses, uncovering fatal inconsistencies between them. Like the false witnesses at the trial of Jesus: “their testimony did not agree.” No, I have tried to show how the inconsistencies form a discernible pattern: that of various creative authors reworking a common draft to gain different effects. Not bad witnesses, but good storytellers. Not on the witness stand, but around the campfire. And the parallels with other ancient stories indicate what genre the stories belong to: they are religious legends. Not a bad thing. Not unless you want them to be something else: historical reports. I don’t want them to be one or the other. I just want to understand the texts, and I think I do.

Did Jesus rise from the dead? That wouldn’t be a bad thing either. But given the nature of our sources, there is no particular reason to think so.

How Secure Is the New Testament Witness?

The Gospels: Whose Witness?

From Sunday School classes on up to seminary classes the opinion prevails that the gospels represent the witness of the original disciples or apostles of Jesus who saw what he did and heard what he said and would have taken considerable trouble to keep the developing Jesus tradition pure — especially including the gospel texts that crystallized it. But such a working hypothesis, beloved of apologists, is simply untenable. In *a priori* terms (asking what *would have* happened) as well as in *a posteriori* terms (looking at the texts), the belief in gospel accuracy fails.

To begin with, the whole thing is circular to a degree seldom even envisioned by apologists. They don't even seem to realize the need to deal with the relevant point: do we even know there *was* an original 'college of apostles'? This may seem hypercritical to ask, but I believe that reaction is simply a function of a mindset that has little patience for searching questions and wants to get on with defending a traditional view which it cannot help seeing as more reasonable — whether or not it is. But it is a live question as to whether there was such an apostolic band, or whether this list of characters is a fiction. In the latter case it might be that the list of twelve represents a reading back into the ministry of Jesus of a group only subsequently constituted as such by a shared resurrection vision (an appearance or an hallucination, I leave to you to decide). These men may have actually been among the associates of Jesus even though he had never chosen a circle of twelve. (The story of Jesus choosing them seems to me clearly to be based on that in Exodus 18 in which Moses chooses the seventy elders at the behest of Jethro, and thus a fiction.)

Or they may not have been associates of Jesus at all, owing their leadership role to other factors entirely. For instance,

they may have been chosen as leaders of a Jewish-Christian faction, standing for the number of the twelve tribes, just as the Qumran sect had a council of twelve. And then, at some later time, they may have been fictively retrojected into the time of Jesus to increase their clout.

Or, as Robert Eisenman suggests in his *James the Brother of Jesus*, they may be fictional replications (more than one of each) of an earlier leadership group that survives alongside them in Galatians and to some extent in Acts — the Pillars or the Heirs (*Desposunoi*), the ‘brethren of the Lord.’ These, in turn, were eventually understood to be literal, fleshly siblings of Jesus, but they were also understood in Gnostic (and maybe other) circles as *spiritual brethren* of Jesus. Eisenman opts for a physical, dynastic understanding, which is perhaps the most plausible option. At any rate, their ranks included James the Just (also represented as Salih, ‘the Just,’ in the Koran, as well as, I would add, Silas in Acts), Judas Thomas, Simeon bar-Cleophas, and Josep. I think, however, his presence in Mark 6:3 is a scribal slip or alteration, misplacing the name of Jesus’ father Joseph and replacing a fourth brother named John (reflected in the Catholic belief that James and John bar Zebedee were Jesus’ ‘cousins’ and in Luke’s nativity story that makes Jesus the cousin of another John, the Baptist).

On Eisenman’s theory (though the details are my inferences), *James bar Zebedee* and *James ‘of Alphaeus’* (meaning ‘the substitute’!) are both transformations of James the Just, Brother of the Lord. *Simon Peter* and *Simon Zelotes* would be versions of Simeon-bar-Cleophas, the brother of Jesus who succeeded James as bishop (*mebaqqr*) of Jerusalem. *Judas Thomas* became *Judas Iscariot* (‘the False One,’ reflecting later doctrinal disputes), ‘*Judas not Iscariot*,’ *Bar-Tholomew*, *Thaddaeus/Addai*, as well as *Thamoud* and *Hud* in the Koran. *Andrew* the brother of Simon Peter reflects the *Son of Man* (*aner*), brother of Simon bar-Cleophas. *Matthew* is a broad pun on *mathetes*, ‘disciple.’ *Lebbaeus* is another form of *Oblias*, ‘the Bulwark,’ title of James the Just. *Philip* has been misplaced from the list of seven Deacons. *John bar Zebedee* represents the Pillar John, Jesus’ brother instead of the misplaced Josep.

The scarcity of information about these men in the New Testament is startling and more than a little suggestive of the

possibility that they represent an artificial construction. Every single instance of Peter, James, or John taking the stage looks like one of the Buddhist tales of Ananda where the disciple is simply a straight man for the Master. This idea is reinforced by the fact that when one of them momentarily surfaces to say something, he is simply an artificial mouthpiece for the group. And notice, it is only James, John, and Peter, the same names, though supposedly not entirely the same characters, as the Pillars of Galatians, implying these have been chosen for fifteen minutes of fame on account of the lingering memory of their original identity as Jesus' brethren.

Thus we have no reason at all to believe there would have been a group of apostolic censors riding herd on early Christians, keeping them straight about what Jesus said and did. Instead, it seems to me we have reason to expect that the early Christian leaders would have had ample cause to fabricate sayings and ascribe them to Jesus. They would have needed to assert their own credentials and to negate those of their rivals. This is surely why Mark's gospel repeatedly trounces both the Twelve and the Heirs. Mark must have been like Marcion, the early second-century theologian who championed Paul as the only genuine apostle.

Marcion believed that the Twelve had completely bungled the task assigned to them, failing to understand that Jesus was the Son and revealer of a hitherto-unknown God who was now offering the human race adoption as his children. As creations of the Old Testament Jehovah, humanity slaved under the repressive laws of a vengeful deity, but the loving Father of Jesus offered forgiveness and salvation. Marcion believed Jesus had recruited Paul because Peter and the others had failed to grasp Jesus' point: they were confusing the two deities as well as the two religions. Marcion's theory is certainly plausible historically and psychologically. It is by no means uncommon for even the most ardent followers of a reformer to balk at the more radical of his teachings and to readjust the new faith to the old as soon as they get the chance. That is just what happened, *e.g.*, with Martin Luther, who wanted to relegate several New Testament books (James, Jude, Hebrews, Revelation) to an appendix in his new Bible. His followers just couldn't go the whole way with him. It didn't take Wesleyans long to bury their teacher's radical doctrine of Christian perfectionism, either.

Well, Mark seems to have had a similar disdain for both the major Jewish leadership cliques. This is why he portrays James and John as shameless self-promoters, asking for first dibs on the best seats next to Jesus in his messianic reign (Mark 10:35–40). This has to be why he chopped up and rewrote an earlier story (derived by some creative Christian from Exodus 18) in Mark 3:20–21, 25, 31–35.

In Exodus chapter 18, the Israelites have crossed the sea and, free of Egyptian harassment, they are settling down to a peaceful nomadic existence. They depend heavily upon Moses as a divine oracle to settle their disputes and to make new laws to guide them in their new existence. Moses is busy all day, every day. One day someone announces that his father-in-law Jethro has arrived with his wife Zippora and their two young sons. Will Moses see them? He hastens to greet them warmly. Jethro eventually notices the burden of work occupying Moses 24/7, and he ventures a bit of advice: why not appoint a body of lower court elders to hear cases and apply Moses' rules, leaving only the most serious cases for his personal attention? Moses sees the wisdom in this, and he sees to organizing a system of lower courts to share his work.

Now someone thought this would make a good story applied to Jesus. As it must originally have read, Jesus' mother and siblings pay him a visit, concerned that, as they have heard, Jesus is constantly mobbed, with no time to grab a meal. They arrive, someone announces them, and Jesus readily defers to them as Moses did, happily taking their advice, which issues in the appointment of the Twelve. Thus the Heirs and the Twelve are both honored, albeit in a way that gently gives precedence to the Heirs, since, without them, there would be no Twelve Apostles.

The transparent parallel to the Mosaic original marks the whole story as a fiction right off the bat. But then Mark has transformed it, removing it even further from historical reality, by placing the choosing of the Twelve (Mark 3:13–19a), with no stated motivation, just *before* the introduction of Jesus' kin into the story — and when they get there, he rebuffs them! Not only that, their journey to Jesus has been made into the mission of a modern family trying to take a cultist son or daughter in hand to deliver him to a deprogrammer! They come to take Jesus

away, concluding that he is insane (Mark 3:21). The artificiality of the present arrangement is obvious from the fact that the appointment of the Twelve to share Jesus' workload seems to have been without result, since Jesus is still swamped after his relatives get there.

Like Marcion, Mark must have preferred Paul. He seems to have Paul in view in another episode, Mark 9:38–40. This story is patently rewritten from another version of the appointment of Moses' assistants, this time Numbers 11. This time, it is God himself who tells Moses to appoint seventy elders to share the burden. Moses takes them out of the camp, and the Spirit descends upon them, lending them a share of Moses' own oracular authority. However, two of the seventy could not make it on time. "Now two remained in the camp, one named Eldad, the other Medad, and the spirit rested upon them ... and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!' And Joshua son of Nun, Moses servant, one of his elite, said, 'My lord Moses, forbid them!' But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all Jehovah's people were prophets, that Jehovah would put his spirit upon them!' " (Numbers 11:26–30)

Here is Mark's version: "John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbid him, for he was not following us.' But Jesus said to him, 'Do not forbid him, for no one who does a miracle in my name will soon be speaking evil of me.' " Why repaint Jesus' face over Moses' in this picture? Simply in order to rebut a common distaste for some notable someone doing miracles in Jesus' name — someone who was perceived to be "working the Twelve's side of the street." Who could Mark have been thinking of? Surely Paul. He was claiming Jesus' approval before Paul, as if before the latter had come on the scene.

By the same token, however, the evangelist Matthew omits this scene from Mark when composing his own gospel, and he substitutes for it Matthew 5:17, 19: "Do not think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets; I have come not to abolish scripture but to fulfill it ... Therefore anyone who relaxes the least of these commandments and teaches other to do so shall be ranked least in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew is dealing with a rival Christian viewpoint, because he does not say,

“Don’t *accuse me of abolishing* the torah,” as an enemy might be imagined saying, but rather, “Do not think *I came to abolish* the Torah” — language suggesting a Christian interpretation of the mission of Jesus.

What *had* God sent him to do? A non-Christian detractor would never have said this, but a rival Christian might — someone with the belief that Christ’s mission was to bring the law to an end, with the result that Christians need no longer obey it. Does that sound like anyone we know? Of course, this is the Pauline gospel. And we know just as clearly that Matthew did not espouse it. It is already clear he expected Christians to keep every last provision of the Torah, and at the end of the gospel he has Jesus say to the missionaries (the original audience for the book) to go to the nations, *i.e.*, the Gentiles, and to instruct them in everything Jesus has commanded in the gospel. That obviously intends the Sermon on the Mount, including the commandment not to let the least commandment of the Torah slip. In other words, Matthew preaches the very gospel Paul in Galatians condemns! And thus it is no surprise that Matthew puts a condemnation of Paul into his gospel where Mark had him praise Paul.

Paul is also certainly in Matthew’s mind in Matthew 7:21–23: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never chose you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness!’ ” The ‘many’ are the multitudes of Pauline Christians among the gentiles, shocked to find at this late date that they have backed the wrong horse. Jesus does not reject them for sinful habits and hypocrisy, of which he says nothing. These are people who expect to receive his approbation! What can they have done wrong? They did not keep the Torah: “you workers of lawlessness.” And, literally, the text says, “I never knew you,” but often in the Bible, *to know* denotes ‘to choose,’ as in Genesis 18:17–19, where God says that, of all living on the earth, he has “known,” *i.e.*, chosen, Abraham to bequeath his covenant to future generations. Thus Matthew summarily rejects all the talk about Paul having been chosen from his

mother's womb to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:15–16). Jesus never knew — *chose* — him. Matthew composed 5:17 and 19 to embellish verse 18, which already stood as a saying of Jesus in the Q source of sayings, which he shared with Luke, where it also appears (Luke 16:17). So, again, Matthew has added sayings of Jesus in order to discredit a rival Christian teacher.

By contrast, Matthew's favorite was Peter, which is why he adds material to the story of Peter's confessing Jesus' messianic office. "Blessed are you, Simon bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And so I say you are 'Peter' [*a rock*], and on this rock I will erect my church. And the gates of Hades shall not withstand its assault. Behold, I entrust you with the keys of the kingdom, so that whatever command you bind upon men will be considered bound in heaven, and whatever sins you loose men from on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:17–19). Mark and Luke have pretty much the same story up to this point. In both Mark 8:27–30 and Luke 9:18–22 Peter confesses Jesus' messiahship, but this investiture of Simon Peter as the fountainhead of the Papacy is conspicuous by its absence. Did both Mark and Luke just happen to omit it? Running short on ink maybe? Of course, Matthew has added it to reinforce the dignity of the authorities he venerated.

Matthew, unlike Mark's nameless predecessor who tended to elevate the Heirs above the Twelve in his story of the choosing of the Twelve, seems to have preferred the Twelve to the Heirs, as he does not omit Jesus' rebuff to the relatives (Matthew 12:46–50).

John the evangelist goes out of his way to make sure the reader understands Jesus' brothers were not in sympathy with him in John 7:2–7, where they dare him to go to Jerusalem for public relations reasons, knowing he is wanted by the authorities there. And when on the cross, Jesus commits his aging mother into the care of one of the Twelve; conspicuously it is not one of his brothers (John 19:25–27). That is almost as much as saying outright that Jesus wants his disciples to be in charge of the church, not his relatives.

None of this should be very surprising, since such succession disputes are common in new religions. Muslims had to line up behind either the Companions of the Prophet (the first three Caliphs, Muhammad's disciples Abu-bekr, Umar, and Uthman) or the Pillars, as his relatives were also called: Khadijah, Fatima, and Ali. The former became the Sunnis, the latter the Shia. After Joseph Smith went on to glory, the Mormon Church divided over whether to follow the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles Smith had named or his son, Joseph Smith, Junior. The former became the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, while the latter became the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Should the followers of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad follow his chief evangelist, Reverend Louis Farrakhan, or his son, Warith Deen Muhammad? The former became the Nation of Islam, the latter the American Muslim Mission. And in several of these cases partisans forged more than one saying or letter from the founder to secure their favorite contender's claim. The same would likely have happened in the case of Jesus and the earliest disciples. Looking at the evidence of the sayings, it seems that it did.

Dead and Can't Blow the Gaff

The question now arises, what exactly are the Twelve supposed to have to do with the four gospels? There are two claims often made. One is that advanced by Harald Riesenfeld (Professor of New Testament at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, author of *The Gospel Tradition*, 1970) and Birger Gerhardsson (*Memory and Manuscript: Oral and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, 1961) that, since the gospels stem from the circle of twelve disciples, they must be accurate because these men must have followed the rabbinical practices of strict memorization and transmission of their Master's sayings. This, again, is hopelessly circular, even if for the sake of argument we were to grant that there was such a circle of close disciples. For we just do not know where the gospel materials came from! *If* they stem from a circle of stenographer disciples who memorized everything for posterity, then, fine — the gospels can be trusted.

But that is a big if! That is precisely what we do *not* know! And this is where internal evidence — the phenomena of the texts themselves — comes in.

There are so many variations and contradictions between sayings, not to mention stories, of Jesus that surely the most natural explanation is that of the form critics: Jesus traditions arose as needed in this and that quarter of the early church — the coinages of anonymous prophets and catechists. Did Jesus prohibit preaching to Samaritans and Gentiles or not? Did he say no longer to fast, temporarily to leave off fasting, or to fast? Was there one pretext for divorce or none? Is the Kingdom to be heralded by apocalyptic signs or not? Did he proclaim his messiahship or keep it a secret? As reporter Harry Reasoner once commented, at the end of a Christmas edition of *Sixty Minutes*: “It seems that, like beauty, Jesus Christ is in the eye of the beholder.” If the texts are anything to go by, no one held the copyright on “Jesus.”

The other claim is even more futile, namely, the apostles must have corroborated the gospels (even if they did not write them) before they circulated far and wide. There is no reason to assume that the gospels were written before the destruction of Jerusalem, headquarters of the apostles according to Luke.

John A. T. Robinson, the feisty bishop of Woolwich who caused so much controversy on both sides of the Atlantic in 1963 with his book *Honest to God* (in which he advocated a synthesis of Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer) was a walking contradiction. He loved to twit his various publics by combining radical theological views with conservative criticism. He was a masterful and critical interpreter of the New Testament, and yet he tried, in his astonishing *Redating the New Testament*, to lasso all twenty-seven New Testament writings and pull them kicking and screaming back before 70 CE. He argued that none of them absolutely demanded a post-70 date since none of them explicitly mention the fall of Jerusalem. This is special pleading, since the gospels, at least, *do* mention the Fall of Jerusalem in the only appropriate way: as if Jesus had predicted it. Conservative (*e.g.*, evangelical pietist) scholars always reply that such a view of gospel prophecy is just the unbelief of skeptics. Why *couldn't* a guy predict the future, whether Jesus Christ, or, let's say, Nostradamus? Just

because you find a predictive prophecy that came true included in a writing needn't prove the text was written after the event, does it?

Well, no. But consider the fact that no scholar ever takes such an approach to dating, say 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, or 1 Enoch, refusing to acknowledge the chief trope of apocalyptic: the thin veiling of the author's past as the narrator's future. They are all books of *faux*-predictions *written after the fact*, and we can tell when each was written by locating where along the time-line the 'predictions' veer off the track. That means, as all agree, that here the author has stopped disguising history as prophecy and is entering blue skies, making genuine predictions which, alas, do not come true. Conservatives never protest that to date *these* books in this manner represents "naturalistic skepticism" about genuine prophetic prediction.

Robinson, like fundamentalists, demands special exemption for passage after passage. Revelation 11:13 says, "And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake." Where? It was "the great city which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified" (11:8), namely Jerusalem.

Mark 13:14–23 gives a deadline for the destruction of the Jerusalem temple: "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains ... From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and put forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place." That would be 70 CE, if not a bit earlier. Luke 21:20 is an even clearer version of the same prediction: "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near."

John 4:21 ("The hour is coming when neither on this mountain [*Gerizim*] nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.") clearly looks back on the destruction of the Mt. Zion temple of Jerusalem, which has become as defunct as the old Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim.

Acts 6:14 (“We have heard him say Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs Moses gave us.”) reflects Jewish vs. Christian debate as to whether the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE was divine punishment for the Jewish rejection of Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 2:14–16 (“For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all men by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved — so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God’s wrath has come upon them at last!”). But then Paul did not write it. Can’t Robinson take a hint? Or rather, a whole series of them? The New Testament writings *do* look back on the fall of Jerusalem and therefore date from a later time.

In *The Theology of Acts in its Historical Setting* J. C. O’Neill (late Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology at New College, Edinburgh University) demonstrates that many factors in that book fit in with, not merely a post-70 date, but even a date in the second century. Thus there is just no inherent likelihood that any of the original apostles would have survived the tumultuous events of 70 CE, the devastating war with Rome that ravaged Galilee and resulted in the siege, starvation, and fall of Jerusalem at Roman hands. They just wouldn’t have been around to stamp any of the gospels with their *Imprimatur*. That is a wish-fulfillment fantasy of apologists.

Character Witnesses — or Just Characters?

Appeal is also made to various persons whose testimonies allegedly underlie the gospels. These individuals seem to sit so close to the narrated events that, *provided the events happened at all, and that these characters were the source of the narrator’s ‘knowledge’ of these events*, we would have good grounds for confidence in the narratives. I have just indicated the multiple difficulties besetting this grossly circular claim. Do we have any reason to believe there were such people and that, if there were, they reported their experiences to the gospel authors?

For instance, the women who discovered the empty tomb: are we sure there even *were* such women? It is not at all implausible that Jesus, like all gurus ancient and modern, attracted a circle of smitten, usually middle-aged, female admirers. But then, on the other hand, the only actual stories we possess starring these women characters bear a striking resemblance to the passion, burial, and resurrection narratives of other Hellenistic redeemer gods!

Mary Magdalene, Salome, Joanna, *et al.*, bear a startling resemblance to Isis and Nephthys who mourn for the betrayed and slain Osiris, search for his body, and anoint it, raising him from the dead. They bear more than a passing resemblance, too, to Cybele who discovered the body of her beloved Attis and resurrected him. And let's not forget Ishtar Shalmith ('the Shulammitite') who, as the Song of Solomon knew, had descended into Sheol to recover the slain Tammuz. And there was Athena who found the remains of Dionysus Zagreus and besought Zeus on his behalf, occasioning his rebirth. Aphrodite similarly found the gored corpse of Adonis and raised him to new life. Not to mention Anath who sought Baal, found his death site, the field of blood, and rescued him from the Netherworld.

Let's take an inventory, shall we? The *only* story in the gospels that features the women is the one in which they seek the tomb of the slain savior, leading to his resurrection. And this story exactly parallels the stories of women devotees seeking the body of the other slain saviors who rise from the dead. I'd say it is at best a toss-up whether these women ever existed as anything but Christian counterparts to the women characters of the resurrection myths of neighboring religions, whence they were likely derived. And if we cannot even make it look all that likely that they existed, it is obviously moot to appeal to them as sources of information. One might as well appeal to the testimony of Cybele to argue that Attis rose from the dead.

The Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:13ff) — who walk and talk with the risen Jesus without recognizing him — might be called to the stand as witnesses of the Risen Christ. Except for two damning criticisms.

First of all, the story sure looks an awful lot like biblical and classical myths in which gods travel among mortals *incognito*

as a kind of *Candid Camera* stunt, to test their reactions. Yahweh's angels so visit Sodom, after visiting Abraham for the same reason. Zeus and Hermes visited palaces and hovels to determine whether mankind deserved destruction in a flood. They appeared to the pious old couple Baucis and Philemon, whose generosity caused them to be spared and made into pillars of Zeus's temple upon death.

A second critical point we might raise is that the Emmaus story greatly resembles a story of the fourth-century BCE, repeated long afterwards, in which a couple has journeyed far to the healing shrine of Asclepius, son of Apollo. Like other suppliants, they had expected a dream-appearance of the god who would relieve the woman of a prolonged pregnancy. But he had not appeared, and they were headed home depressed — until a mysterious stranger joined them and asked why they were so glum. Hearing the sad tale, he tells them to set down her stretcher, whereupon he heals her of what turns out to be tapeworms, not a pregnancy at all. Then he disappears. Sound familiar? What are the chances the Asclepius version is but a myth, while the Jesus version is true fact? Be careful! That is what we mean by special pleading!

But suppose we do take the story as a record of a strange encounter on the lonely Emmaus road? What kind of evidence for the resurrection does it provide? Very ambiguous evidence, if that, for the simple reason that the pair of disciples travels with Jesus for hours, apparently, *without recognizing him!* Oh, you can just cover up the problematical nature of this feature as Luke does, by simple authorial fiat: "They were prevented from recognizing him," but then you're just dealing with a literary composition, not reporting. Imagine if you read such a detail in a newspaper. What would you think? Funny business! The fundamentalist apologist is willing to swallow the problem only because he already wants to believe the text is inspired and inerrant. He is only interested in historical plausibility insofar as he needs it as an argument to rope you in. Where it is lacking he does not miss it.

No, if they spent all that time with the famous Jesus of Nazareth and only decided *after he was gone* that it had been he, then what we have is a case of wistful mistaken identity. Hugh J. Schonfield, notorious author of *The Passover Plot* (1965), saw

this, and he was right. The story practically invites disbelief, as does the similar one in John 20:1–18, where Mary Magdalene does not recognize Jesus either. So does Matthew 28:17, which actually says, “And when they saw him, they worshipped him, but they doubted.”

But, let’s go the second mile. Suppose the story does stem from the breathless testimony of the Emmaus disciples, and suppose it is fairly represented in Luke 24, so that you are sure you have the authentic report of what they told the eleven. Should you believe it? Would you believe such a thing if your friend told you he had seen a mutual friend, known to be dead, alive again? I think you would not. You would suddenly transform into the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume and rediscover the principles he enunciated in his famous essay “On Miracles.” You would ask yourself, “Which is more probable? That Bill is alive again? Or that Stan is lying, or hallucinating, or deceived?” You would automatically assume Stan is not to be believed, though you cannot imagine he is consciously lying. *And this is only if you are quite sure Bill was dead.*

Once a parishioner told me that Alan Duke, our church’s almost-resident street bum, had died during the harsh winter. A couple of weeks later, someone else told me he had seen Alan, alive if not well. It was easy to conclude that my first informant had been the victim of a false rumor, perhaps a case of mistaken identity. Another time, a friend was sitting outside a convenience store, growing increasingly feverish. He spotted his roommate and hailed him, but he received no acknowledgement back. When my friend returned home, his roommate denied having been there at the store. Well, it turned out that my friend Ralph was suffering hallucinations from a ruptured gall bladder poisoning his pancreas! He was rushed to the hospital and came out fine some weeks later. My mother was in the hospital under heavy drugs. She told me she had seen my father and my uncle, both long dead, come walking through her hospital room, wordlessly waving to her! Were my dad and Uncle Douglas raised from the dead? Or was it no coincidence she was drugged at the time? In short, if you heard your friend report that another was resurrected from the dead, you would not automatically believe him, and probably

not at all. You would know that some neglected factor must be making the difference.

What Hath Hierapolis to Do with Higher Criticism?

Apologists prize the statement of Irenaeus (bishop of Lyons in Gaul, but hailing from Asia Minor), who wrote about 175 CE. He appeals to Papias, the famous bishop of Hierapolis, adjacent to the New Testament cities of Colosse and Laodicea in Asia Minor. Papias, a man with antiquarian tastes, had been a hearer of the apostle John, whom Irenaeus also considered the author of the Gospel of John. (He does not say that Papias knew anything about that gospel.) But as Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine's court historian in the early-to-mid fourth century, pointed out, Irenaeus had failed to note that Papias mentioned the apostle John but says only that he had interviewed the Elder John, who would seem to be a personage of the next generation, someone who had himself ostensibly heard the teaching of some apostle. Most scholars feel Eusebius, who had come to disdain Papias' 'chiliasm' — his belief in a literal coming Millennium — was just trying to distance John the apostle from Papias and his doctrines. But the ambiguity in Papias' statement is quite real and plainly present in Irenaeus' quotation of Papias. By the way, numerous passages in Irenaeus have him attribute this or that theological or liturgical point to the tradition of the elders who heard the apostles. And the appeals are obviously fanciful, even anachronistic, demonstrating that for Irenaeus as well as for Eusebius, whatever they deemed true was to be provided an 'apostolic' pedigree after the fact. 'Apostolicity' was just a function of 'correct in my opinion.' There is no genuine historical claim here, whether about apostolic authorship of the gospels or anything else.

When Source Criticism Is Textual Criticism

We have what at least at first appears to be a rather different question on our hands when it comes to a different

aspect of gospel reliability, namely that of textual soundness. Is it possible that, already by the early third century, when the first manuscripts appear, the gospels had suffered serious textual corruption — so early that it has forever undermined whatever the evangelists meant to write for us? It would not be surprising from one standpoint, in that it is the earliest extant texts which feature more flagrant scribal freedom, not the latest, possibly reflecting a scenario in which the texts came to seem sacrosanct only as time went on. At any rate, the further back one goes, the more extravagant the corruption. But is there a firewall back there somewhere?

What about gospel source criticism, specifically the question of Synoptic dependence? It looks to most scholars as if Matthew and Luke each used two major sources, namely the Gospel of Mark and the Q Source (‘Q’ for *Quelle*, German for ‘source’), with the result that there is a great deal of overlap between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are therefore called the *Synoptic* gospels, “The gospels told from the same vantage-point.” Does not this Mark/Q hypothesis (or any of the other Synoptic theories in principle) demand that we *do* have a very early ‘core sample’ of the earlier gospel in the use made of it by subsequent evangelists? Let’s stick with the Mark/Q version for simplicity’s sake.

Since we have two gospels, Matthew and Luke, that both used Mark, and they both seem to have used the same text, doesn’t that mean the agreements between Matthew and Luke preserve a text of Mark that had already circulated pretty widely by the time the other two were written? (Of course, then you have to try to date all three Synoptics, and this is a hugely complex matter in its own right. Internal data lead me to posit a date of about 100 CE for Mark, and about 150 for both Matthew and Luke. Most scholars seem to adopt the earliest possible dates, probably for apologetical purposes. I don’t know if that matters a great deal here, since we are in any case talking about relative dates of composition: how long it might have taken for the Markan original to have become significantly altered versus the window of time between Mark and his followers Matthew and Luke.)

I believe that, yes, the agreements between Mark and the other two *do* provide a helpful and important control. The

relationship between them does not allow much time between the writing of Mark and a version of Mark much like our own being available to both later evangelists, perhaps widely separated geographically. But, for what it's worth, this fact cuts both ways. It becomes just as important to consider where Matthew and Luke *diverge from Mark in agreement with one another*. For a long time, proponents of the Mark/Q hypothesis have pointed to these "minor agreements" against Mark as evidence that Matthew and Luke both used an edition of Mark earlier than the canonical one.

Most of these agreements against Mark are in my opinion not that significant for our purposes, but one important one — as it bears on gospel Christology — would be the trial scene of Jesus. According to Mark 14:62 Jesus answers the Christological question forthrightly: "I am." By contrast, Matthew 26:64 has "You have said so," while Luke 22:70 has "You say that I am." It is hard to resist the suggestion that both Matthew and Luke were reading a text of Mark in which he gave an equivocal answer. In fact there actually are a couple of old copies of Mark that do have, though not in exactly the same words, something like "You say [so]." I would say we have not so much a simultaneous, independent redactional change by Matthew and Luke to make an originally clear answer ambiguous, as a scribal 'improvement' to an ambiguous Mark to make Jesus forthrightly confess what Christians would like him to have confessed. A textual corruption at an important point, I should say.

We also need to look for places where it appears that one of the later evangelists was not looking at the same version of Mark as the other. The prize example of this would be the 'Great Omission' of Mark 6:45–8:26 by Luke, though it appears reproduced in Matthew 14:22–16:12. Some scholars have long suggested that Luke's copy of Mark lacked the whole section, and this observation is especially interesting in that the omitted portion of Mark contains one of the pair of miracle story sequences in Mark.

We find two parallel chains of miracle stories in Mark. The first commences with a sea miracle: the stilling of the storm in Mark 4:35–41. Next comes a set of three healings: the demoniac with 'Legionnaire's Disease' (5:1–20), the hemorrhaging woman

(5:25–34), and Jairus’ daughter (5:21–23, 35–43). Then there is a miraculous feeding (6:34–44). The second sequence has as its sea miracle the walking on water (6:45–51). Its three healings are those of the Bethsaida blind man (8:22–26), the Syro-Phoenician’s daughter (7:24b–30), and the deaf-mute (7:32–37). Finally, a miraculous feeding (8:1–10).

How striking that Luke’s Great Omission covers the second sequence! It might be that Luke saw the Markan duplication, decided he lacked space for redundancy, and cut the second sequence. But it may well be that Mark’s gospel had been circulating with two alternate versions of the miracle chain, some copies with the one, others with the other, and Luke’s copy of Mark had only the first. Matthew’s copy of Mark would have been a version that included both — just to be on the safe side. That is standard scribal procedure after all.

One might also wonder if Matthew was using a copy of Mark that lacked the peculiar feature of ‘sandwiching’ stories together. For example, Mark has the healing of the bleeding woman and the raising of Jairus’ daughter imbricated one within the other, but not Matthew. There, one is over before the second begins. Our copies of Mark have the anticlimactic scene of Jesus cursing the fig tree with no immediate result, then entering Jerusalem and merely looking around, then returning next morning when the fig tree is discovered to be withered, then proceeding back into the city, where he cleanses the temple. It all seems unnatural. Matthew, however, has the cleansing of the temple, all at once and self-contained, then the Triumphal Entry and an immediate temple cleansing. One wonders if Matthew’s versions are not original. It is elsewhere manifest that Matthew has copied and abridged Mark, so I am not suggesting Mark abridged Matthew. Rather, Matthew rewrote Mark, but a version of Mark that had not split up unitary episodes and enclosed them within one another. So. Yes, to some extent, *the gospels may have begun to mutate and multiply even before they began to use one another.*

The Gospel According to John Rylands

Much has been made of the John Rylands Papyrus (**P52**). It is a fragment from a codex (a bound book, not a scroll) and it

contains the text of John 18:31–33 on one side and 37–38 on the other. Discovered in the sands of Egypt, it is now housed at the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England. The papyrus is widely held to anchor both the composition of the book in the first century, because of the paleography, and the authenticity of the text, since it matches our version so perfectly and so early. But this is over-simple. Paleography (the study and comparison of ancient handwriting styles, and dating manuscripts on that basis) makes the John Rylands Papyrus date from around 125 CE, with a range of about 50 years in either direction. But, as Alvin Padilla (Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) has shown, there are altogether too few relevant writing samples to make such a judgment possible in this case. He speaks of “the circuitous nature of dating manuscripts according to text types,” noting that it “is rather arbitrary since there simply aren’t enough writing samples” from the envisioned period. “Since the John Rylands Papyrus is considered the oldest extant manuscript, it is used as the ‘standard’ for the time period.” And that is obviously circular. So much for the attempt to rule out a mid-second-century date for the Gospel of John by appeal to this lone papyrus. It is, sorry to say, a weak reed.

Here is the whole of the text: “Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.’ The Jews said to him, ‘It is not lawful for us to put any man to death.’ This was spoken to fulfill the word which Jesus had spoken to show by what death he was to die. Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ ” and “Pilate said to him, ‘Then you are a king?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice.’ Pilate said to him, ‘What is truth?’ After he had said this he went out to the Jews again and told them, ‘I find no crime in him.’ ”

I submit to you that this postage stamp of John does not vindicate the pure transmission of the entire document. The rest of this gospel might have looked just like our Gospel of John, but then again it might not have. Would it have contained the Appendix, chapter 21?

Consider the various theories meant to account for the many puzzling discontinuities and skips in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus leaves Judea in one chapter, only to be back there later in the same chapter with no recorded transition. He gives most of the Good Shepherd discourse in chapter 10:1–18, but seems to pick it back up months later without missing a beat in verse 25. The Last Supper discourse stretches from 13:31 to 14:31, when Jesus says it's time to leave. But then he resumes in 15:1 as if nothing happened. Scholars have surmised that some early copyist made a mess of the pages and reassembled them in the wrong order, or that scribes expanded the gospel, cramming in more text where it seemed to fit thematically, but without considering whether it made any sense as a narrative. Who knows? The John Rylands snippet just does not help resolve any of these questions of textual evolution. It does not tell us what version of the gospel it represents, so it remains difficult to date the gospel as a whole on the basis of it. It might even be a fragment of one of the underlying *sources* of the gospel.

**By Your Words You Shall Be Acquitted;
By Your Words You Shall Be Condemned.**

Some have protested claims of wholesale textual degradation in the New Testament by appeal to the presence in the texts of all manner of consistent word and concept usage distinctive to each author and even to underlying source documents. Had the texts really been ravaged by haphazard alterations by many hands already before our earliest copies, it would not be possible to observe these authorial/redactional patterns. I agree completely. Furthermore, if one had to conclude the readings of any and all texts were random, none particularly likely to represent an author's or redactor's intent, one would have to dismiss a redaction-critical performance like that of Hans Conzelmann (Göttingen Professor of New Testament, author of the milestone work *The Theology of Saint Luke*) on Luke.

Conzelmann catalogued the numerous subtle word changes Luke made in Mark and showed they pointed in definite direction, tending, for instance, to tone down Mark's

expectation of a soon-coming end of the age. He showed how Luke had schematized biblical history, with the ministry of Jesus as “the center of time,” culminating the era of Israel and preparing for the church age to follow, chronicled in the Acts of the Apostles. The whole analysis is striking and compelling. Are we to dismiss it all as a series of exegetical hallucinations? I am not willing to do so. I don’t think Conzelmann could have made the sense he made of both Mark and Luke if he was really studying a mass of random readings, not something approaching the original text.

However, let me note that it is the detection of sudden departures from these characteristic patterns that signals that the texts *have* suffered significant interpolations — much more so than conservatives seem willing to consider. We do not have total textual chaos, as we do very nearly in the cases of documents like the *Acts of Paul*. What we have are documents, which contain a number of significant patches, and additions identifiable precisely by comparison with the authorial and redactional styles manifest elsewhere in them. Indeed, this is exactly how it is possible so neatly to slice up the Pentateuch into four component sources.

One illustrative New Testament example would be Acts 20:28: “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord [or, of God] which he obtained with his own blood.” The idea on display here — that the death of Jesus on the cross saves believers — so drastically contravenes Luke’s studied avoidance of this theme elsewhere in his gospel and Acts (he even omits it from his Markan source), that we must severely doubt we are in possession of the original reading.

Luke went to the trouble of omitting the words “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many” from Mark when composing his own version of the Last Supper. Mark also had Jesus say, “the son of man came not to serve but to be served, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Significantly, Luke has substituted for that saying a subtly but crucially different version: “Who is greater: he who reclines at table, or he who serves? Is it not he who reclines at table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). He has again omitted the ransom business. In Luke 24 and in Acts, where

he several times has Jesus and the apostles preach the word of salvation, he makes it clear that one must believe in Jesus and be baptized in his name, but there is never any mention of his *death* as the means of salvation. For Luke it is simply a matter of fulfilled prophecy: Messiah's death was predicted, so Jesus had to die before he could reign (Luke 24:25–27; Acts 3:18; 13:26–28), but that is the extent of it. It is his *name* that saves (Luke 24:46–47; Acts 2:38; 3:16; 4:10–12), neither his blood nor his death. The presence of textual variations (some manuscripts have “the church of God” instead of “church of the Lord”) confirms this suspicion.

Similarly, even if we had no manuscript evidence for the secondary character of both the woman taken in adultery pericope of John and the Longer Ending of Mark (the last twelve verses of Mark printed in the King James Version and in many modern translations as well), stylistic irregularities would be enough by themselves to reveal them as spurious text.

Voyage of the Beegle

In his great book *The Inspiration of Scripture* (1963), Dewey M. Beegle (a Free Methodist and New Testament Professor at the New York Theological Seminary) attacked the Warfield version of biblical inerrancy from many angles. He really let the old Princeton divine have it over the latter's claim that inerrancy, strictly speaking, applies only to the original autographs. Beegle replied, in effect, “What original autographs?” He reminded us how few, if any, biblical documents began in the form we now possess. Virtually all of them are patchwork quilts stitched together from many sources. Or else they have been heavily interpolated, or at least appear to have been. Whether you're talking about J, E, D, and P, 1, 2, and 3 Isaiah, Q, Mark, Ur-Markus, Proto-Luke, the Signs Source, the Johannine Discourse Source, the ‘Little Scroll’ underlying Revelation 11, or the Little Apocalypse underlying Mark 13 — or even the adulteress pericope and the Longer Ending of Mark: every biblical book looks like a flowing stream of tradition. The redactional ‘correction’ of these texts has only proceeded apace in modern times, even since Beegle's time.

Now, with a flood of loose and theologically slanted paraphrase versions flooding the Bible market from both the right and the left, the biblical writings continue to mutate. We must remind ourselves of the dictum of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus — “You cannot step twice into the same river.” Given the fluidity of the biblical text, inerrancy just does not fit the Heraclitean reality of the situation.

What this means is that there is no firm line to be drawn between ‘corruption’ of the texts and the evolution of the same writings (and their oral sources) in the shadow period before they reached the ‘canonical’ form. Even if we do have Matthew’s gospel, for example, in the latest form produced by the church at Antioch, we can still discern loose ends of previous editions. Should we try to excise later elements? For example, should we get rid of the Great Commission and go back to the original ‘Not So Great Commission’ of chapter 10? If not, then why chop the Longer Ending of Mark? Or the adulteress passage in John?

The only difference I can see is that the various additions entered the copying process each at a slightly later point. We have no copies of earlier versions of Matthew lacking the Great Commission, so it must have been added early enough for all copies of previous editions to have perished. Eusebius tells us he had seen with his own eyes pre-Nicene copies of Matthew in which the Commission’s baptismal formula was “in my name,” not the familiar Trinitarian version. We don’t have such copies any more, perhaps because they perished in a Constantinian purge of manuscripts (which is surely why there are no manuscripts from before 200 CE). We do happen to have copies, very few, lacking the Longer Ending of Mark, though none of John with the equally secondary Johannine Appendix, chapter 21. Clear evidence of the changes remains, but unaltered texts do not remain, who knows why?

Terms like ‘*Ur-Markus*,’ ‘Proto-Matthew,’ ‘Proto-Luke,’ *etc.*, remind us that there were quite likely earlier, ‘transitional forms’ of these evolving gospels, too. Each underwent significant amplification at some point or another. How is this different in principle from significant interpolations? They are merely two names for the same process. Thus the question is entirely moot as to whether the books of the Bible come to us more or less corrupted from the way they were ‘first’ written down.