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Eyewitnesses to History

by Lee Strobel

“Tell me this,” I said with an edge of challenge in my voice, “is it really possible to be an intelligent, critically thinking person and still believe that the four gospels were written by the people whose names have been attached to them?”

[Dr. Craig] Blomberg set his cup of coffee on the edge of his desk and looked intently at me. “The answer is yes,” he said with conviction. He sat back and continued. “It’s important to acknowledge that strictly speaking, the gospels are anonymous. But the uniform testimony of the early church was that Matthew, also known as Levi, the tax collector and one of the twelve disciples, was the author of the first gospel in the New Testament; that John Mark, a companion of Peter, was the author of the gospel we call Mark; and that Luke, known as Paul’s ‘beloved physician,’ wrote both the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.”

“How uniform was the belief that they were the authors?” I asked.

“There are no known competitors for these three gospels,” he said. “Apparently, it was just not in dispute.”

Even so, I wanted to test the issue further. “Excuse my skepticism,” I said, “but would anyone have had a motivation to lie by claiming these people wrote these gospels, when they really didn’t?” Blomberg shook his head. “Probably not. Remember, these were unlikely characters,” he said, a grin breaking on his face. “Mark and Luke weren’t even among the twelve disciples. Matthew was, but as a former hated tax collector, he would have been the most infamous character next to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus!

“Contrast this with what happened when the fanciful apocryphal gospels were written much later. People chose the names of well known and exemplary figures to be their fictitious authors—Philip, Peter, Mary, James. Those names carried a lot more weight than the names of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So to answer your question, there would not have been any reason to attribute authorship to these three less respected people if it weren’t true.”

That sounded logical, but it was obvious that he was conveniently leaving out one of the gospel writers. “What about John?” I asked. “He was extremely prominent; in fact, he wasn’t just one of the twelve disciples but one of Jesus’ inner three, along with James and Peter.”

“Yes, he’s the one exception,” Blomberg conceded with a nod. “And interestingly, John is the only gospel about which there is some question about authorship.”

“What exactly is in dispute?”

“The name of the author isn’t in doubt—it’s certainly John,” Blomberg replied. “The question is whether it was John the apostle or a different John.

“You see, the testimony of a Christian writer named Papias, dated about A.D. 125, refers to John the apostle and John the elder, and it’s not clear from the context whether he’s talking about one person from two perspectives or two different people. But granted that exception, the rest of the early testimony is unanimous that it was John the apostle—the son of Zebedee—who wrote the gospel.”

“And.” I said in an effort to pin him down further, “you’re convinced that he did?”

“Yes, I believe the substantial majority of the material goes back to the apostle,” he replied. “However, if you read the gospel closely, you can see some indication that its concluding verses may have been finalized by an editor. Personally, I have no problem believing that somebody closely associated with John may have functioned in that role, putting the last verses into shape and potentially creating the stylistic uniformity of the entire document.

“But in any event.” he stressed, “the gospel is obviously based on eyewitness material, as are the other three gospels.”

Delving into Specifics

While I appreciated Blomberg’s comments so far, I wasn’t ready to move on yet. The issue of who wrote the gospels is tremendously important, and I wanted specific details—names, dates, quotations. I finished off my coffee and put the cup on his desk. Pen poised, I prepared to dig deeper.

“Let’s go back to Mark, Matthew, and Luke,” I said. “What specific evidence do you have that they are the authors of the gospels?”

Blomberg leaned forward. “Again, the oldest and probably most significant testimony comes from Papias, who in about A.D. 125 specifically affirmed that Mark had carefully and accurately recorded Peter’s eyewitness observations. In fact, he said Mark ‘made no mistake’ and did not include ‘any false statement.’ And Papias said Matthew had preserved the teachings of Jesus as well.

“Then Irenaeus, writing about A.D. 180, confirmed the traditional authorship. In fact, here,” he said, reaching for a book. He flipped it open and read Irenaeus’ words.

Matthew published his own Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter’s preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul,

set down in a book the Gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his Gospel while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.¹

I looked up from the notes I was taking. “OK, let me clarify this,” I said. “If we can have confidence that the gospels were written by the disciples Matthew and John, by Mark, the companion of the disciple Peter, and by Luke, the historian, companion of Paul, and sort of a first-century journalist, we can be assured that the events they record are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony.”

As I was speaking, Blomberg was mentally sifting my words. When I finished, he nodded.

“Exactly,” he said crisply. . . .

Hot News from History

It’s one thing to say that the gospels are rooted in direct or indirect eyewitness testimony; it’s another to claim that this information was reliably preserved until it was finally written down years later. This, I knew, was a major point of contention, and I wanted to challenge Blomberg with this issue as forthrightly as I could.

Again I picked up Armstrong’s popular book *A History of God*. “Listen to something else she wrote,” I said.

We know very little about Jesus. The first full-length account of his life was St. Mark’s gospel, which was not written until about the year 70, some forty years after his death. By that time, historical facts had been overlaid with mythical elements which expressed the meaning Jesus had acquired for his followers. It is this meaning that St. Mark primarily conveys rather than a reliable straightforward portrayal.²

Tossing the book back into my open briefcase, I turned to Blomberg and continued. “Some scholars say the gospels were written so far after the events that legend developed and distorted what was finally written down, turning Jesus from merely a wise teacher into the mythological Son of God. Is that a reasonable hypothesis, or is there good evidence that the gospels were recorded earlier than that, before legend could totally corrupt what was ultimately recorded?”

Blomberg’s eyes narrowed, and his voice took on an adamant tone. “There are two separate issues here, and it’s important to keep them separate,” he said. “I do think there’s good evidence for suggesting early dates for the writing of the gospels. But even if there wasn’t, Armstrong’s argument doesn’t work anyway.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“The standard scholarly dating, even in very liberal circles, is Mark in the 70s, Matthew and Luke in the 80s, John in the 90s. But listen: that’s still within the lifetimes of various eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, including hostile eyewitnesses who would have served as a corrective if false teachings about Jesus were going around.

“Consequently, these late dates for the gospels really aren’t all that late. In fact, we can make a comparison that’s very instructive. “The two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written by Arian and Plutarch more than four hundred years after Alexander’s death in 323 B.C., yet historians consider them to be generally trustworthy. Yes, legendary material about Alexander did develop over time, but it was only in the centuries after these two writers.

“In other words, the first five hundred years kept Alexander’s story pretty much intact; legendary material began to emerge over the next four hundred years. So whether the gospels were written sixty years or thirty years after the life of Jesus, the amount of time is negligible by comparison. It’s almost a nonissue.”

I could see what Blomberg was saying. At the same time, I had some reservations about it. To me, it seemed intuitively obvious that the shorter the gap between an event and when it was recorded in writing, the less likely those writings would fall victim to legend or faulty memories.

“Let me concede your point for the moment, but let’s get back to the dating of the gospels,” I said. “You indicated that you believe they were written sooner than the dates you mentioned.”

“Yes, sooner,” he said. “And we can support that by looking at the book of Acts, which was written by Luke. Acts ends apparently unfinished—Paul is a central figure of the book, and he’s under house arrest in Rome. With that the book abruptly halts. What happens to Paul? We don’t find out from Acts, probably because the book was written before Paul was put to death.”

Blomberg was getting more wound up as he went. “That means Acts cannot be dated any later than A.D. 62. Having established that, we can then move backward from there. Since Acts is the second of a two-part work, we know the first part—the gospel of Luke—must have been written earlier than that. And since Luke incorporates parts of the gospel of Mark, that means Mark is even earlier.

“If you allow maybe a year for each of those, you end up with Mark written no later than about A.D. 60, maybe even the late 50s. If Jesus was put to death in A.D. 30 or 33, we’re talking about a maximum gap of thirty years or so.”

He sat back in his chair with an air of triumph. “Historically speaking, especially compared with Alexander the Great,” he said, “that’s like a news flash!”

Indeed, that was impressive, closing the gap between the events of Jesus’ life and the writing of the gospels to the point where it was negligible by historical standards.

However, I still wanted to push the issue. My goal was to turn the clock back as far as I could to get to the very earliest information about Jesus.

Going Back to the Beginning

I stood and strolled over to the bookcase. “Let’s see if we can go back even further,” I said, turning toward Blomberg, “How early can we date the fundamental beliefs in Jesus’ atonement, his resurrection, and his unique association with God?”

“It’s important to remember that the books of the New Testament are not in chronological order,” he began. “The gospels were written after almost all the letters of Paul, whose writing ministry probably began in the late 40s. Most of his major letters appeared during the 50s. To find the earliest information, one goes to Paul’s epistles and then asks, ‘Are there signs that even earlier sources were used in writing them?’”

“And,” I prompted, “What do we find?”

“We find that Paul incorporated some creeds, confessions of faith, or hymns from the earliest Christian church. These go way back to the dawning of the church soon after the Resurrection.

“The most famous creeds include Philippians 2:6-11, which talks about Jesus being ‘in very nature God,’ and Colossians 1:15-20, which describes him as being ‘the image of the invisible God,’ who created all things and through whom all things are reconciled with God ‘by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.’

“Those are certainly significant in explaining what the earliest Christians were convinced about Jesus. But perhaps the most important creed in terms of the historical Jesus is 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul uses technical language to indicate he was passing along this oral tradition in relatively fixed form

Blomberg located the passage in his Bible and read it to me.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.³

“And here’s the point,” Blomberg said. “If the Crucifixion was as early as A.D. 30, Paul’s conversion was about 32. Immediately Paul was ushered into Damascus, where he met with a Christian named Ananias and some other disciples. His first meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem would have been about A.D. 35. At some point along there, Paul was given this creed, which had already been formulated and was being used in the early church.

“Now, here you have the key facts about Jesus’ death for our sins, plus a detailed list of those to whom he appeared in resurrected form—all dating back to within two to five years of the events themselves!

“That’s not later mythology from forty or more years down the road, as Armstrong suggested. A good case can be made for saying that Christian belief in the Resurrection, though not yet written down, can be dated to within two years of that very event.

“This is enormously significant,” he said, his voice rising a bit in emphasis. “Now you’re not comparing thirty to sixty years with the five hundred years that’s generally acceptable for other data—you’re talking about two!”

I couldn’t deny the importance of that evidence. It certainly seemed to take the wind out of the charge that the Resurrection—which is cited by Christians as the crowning confirmation of Jesus’ divinity—was merely a mythological concept that developed over long periods of time as legends corrupted the eyewitness accounts of Christ’s life. For me, this struck especially close to home—as a skeptic, that was one of my biggest objections to Christianity.

I leaned against the bookcase. We had covered a lot of material, and Blomberg’s climactic assertion seemed like a good place to pause.

Notes:

¹Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.3.4.

²Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine/Ephiphany, 1993), 79.

³1 Corinthians 15:3-7.

