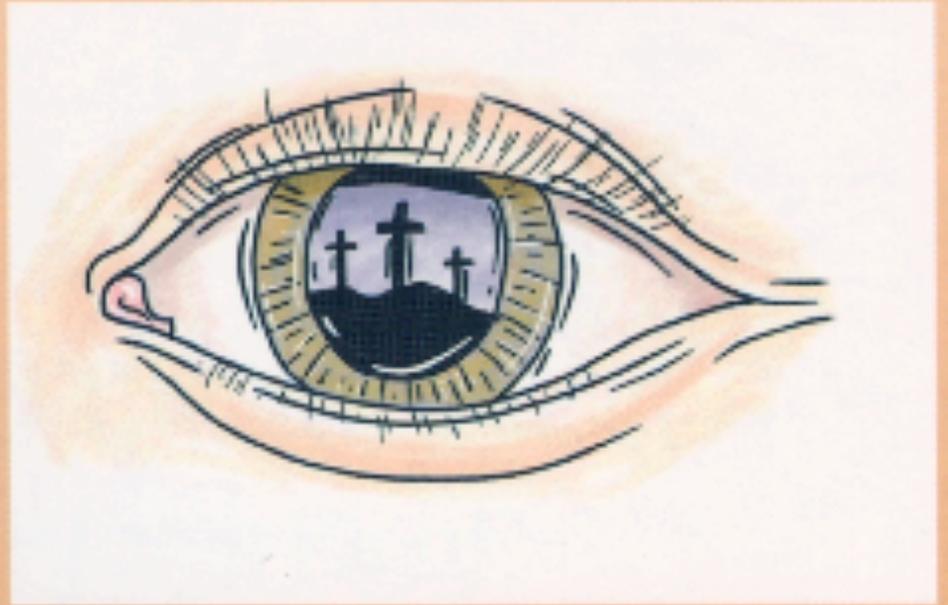


# Eyewitness



**Did the Writers of the  
New Testament Get  
Their Picture of Jesus Right?**

Dick Tripp

# Did the New Testament Writers Get Their Picture of Jesus Right?

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## Foreword

We are born sceptics. While we are far more than reasoning creatures, we are never less than reasoning beings. Doubting and questioning are essential if we are to attain maturity. The integrity of the Christian way of life depends upon the trustworthiness of its foundation documents. If their message about Jesus of Nazareth and his life, his work and its outcome have no historical validity, then we may relegate Christian teachings to the realms of mere fairy-tale or mythical legend. If, however, these documents do have historical, eye-witness credibility, then no thoughtful person dare ignore their straightforward, factual claims. We welcome, therefore, a booklet addressing some of the recurring questions about the reliability of these New Testament documents.

Dick Tripp addresses the common-sense implications of the basic questions about who wrote the New Testament books, and when. Rather than becoming side-tracked by the related scholarly debates about these issues, of which he is well aware, Dick Tripp keeps a clear focus on the practical significance of such issues. Sincere enquirers, and doubters, will find here food for thought and fuel for strengthening their confidence in the reliability of scripture.

As a raw, new Christian in the late 1950s, my faith was enriched by a somewhat retiring young curate who brought regular input to a weekly lunch-hour fellowship in Christchurch. Dick Tripp's love for Christ and love for sharing his Good News were a challenge to my timid commitment. Now, nearly forty years on, I count it a privilege to add a foreword to Dick's mature reflection on the dependability of the texts by which we both have lived and worked in the interim. My experience is that where anyone dares to take seriously the claims of these historically reliable scriptures, whether Papua New Guineans, Scots or Kiwis, they still prove to be "*the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.*" This booklet lays a reasonable foundation for such a faith today.

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## Introduction

Christians have believed for 2,000 years that Jesus was God. They claim that this human person who lived in Palestine in the first century AD was none other than the Creator of the universe, the Lord of heaven and earth. They believe that God exists as three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>, and that Jesus, the Son, became human in the womb of Mary. He was born in a stable, lived till the age of 33, was crucified for his claims to be the promised messiah, rose from the dead, today reigns in heaven and will one day come back to judge the world. These things are clearly taught in the 27 books and letters of the New Testament, have been written into the Christian creeds down the centuries, and are believed by millions today.

It is natural in this modern world with its multiplicity of beliefs, and expectations of the ability of science to solve our problems, that many are going to be sceptical of such things. However, if we reject the truths of Christianity it raises an important question: How did such a remarkable collection of writings as the New Testament, which have had such an impact on world history, and still do, come to be written?

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<sup>1</sup> If you wish to explore further the Christian view of God as three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may I commend my booklet *Understanding the Trinity: A Look at the God Revealed in Jesus Christ*.

One of the arguments used to discredit the truth that Jesus was God goes something like this. He was only an ordinary human being, though he obviously had some uncommon wisdom and courage, and perhaps some unusual gifts of healing. After his death about AD 30, stories about him were passed down by word of mouth. By the time the New Testament books and letters were written all sorts of exaggerated stories had arisen about him, such as: the remarkable nature of his healing miracles and his miracles over nature, his claims to have come from heaven and to be the Saviour and Judge of human beings, and his resurrection from the dead. As a result of this distortion of the facts his followers came to believe these things and have done so ever since.

Obviously such a view must accept that there is a sufficient time gap before things were written down for this to have happened, and must discredit any eyewitness claims in the New Testament.

There are some issues here that I have dealt with more fully in two other booklets, *Is Jesus Really God?* and *Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?* In this booklet I want to focus on one issue: Is the gap between Jesus and the writers of the New Testament really sufficient to allow these distortions to take place?

## **Jesus is God in the New Testament**

To begin with it is necessary to state that the New Testament clearly presents Jesus as God. Though some appear to imagine otherwise it must be obvious to anyone who takes time to read it.

He was God's agent in creating the world .....Colossians 1:16.  
 He is God's agent in revealing God to human beings.....Matthew 11:27.  
 He is God's agent in reconciling people to God.....2 Corinthians 5:18,19.  
 One day he will be God's agent in judgement of the world.....John  
 5:22,23.

He is the Son of God (Romans 1:4), sharing the nature of God (Hebrews 1:3), the form of God (Philippians 2:6), the image of God (Colossians 1:16) and the glory of God (Hebrews 1:3).

It is significant that new Testament writers often take texts from the Old Testament that refer to God, and there, right in the middle of their quotations, is Jesus. For instance, instead of "**Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one**" (Deuteronomy 6:4), we have, "**For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live**" (I Corinthians 8:6). The same phenomenon is

consistent through the New Testament and is evident across virtually all early Christianity for which we have evidence.

The earliest writing we have in the New Testament is possibly Paul's first letter to the Church in Thessalonica, very likely written in AD 50 when Paul was in Corinth. In this letter Jesus is the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son in heaven, and the author of salvation. He is risen from the dead, active in his people through the Holy Spirit, and one day coming back to gather his people and judge the world.

New Testament scholar, C. F. D. Moule, insists:

*If the deification of Jesus was the end result of an evolutionary process in pious imagination, how was it that a dedicated Jewish monotheist like Paul, at the earliest known stage of Christian literature, was already treating Christ as 'one with God'? ...Whatever explanation is offered for this extraordinary phenomenon, the facile theory of an evolving superstition will not do. It simply does not fit the facts.*

### **Dating the New Testament writings**

It is still possible to find serious works of scholarship dating the entire New Testament before 70 AD (For example: John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, 1976, and John W. Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem*, 1991) and equally serious works dating much of the New Testament considerably later. Maybe the variety of views that are held illustrate the subjectivity that enters in when discussing material that is as personally challenging to one's life-style and one's world-view as is the New Testament!

Austin Farrer observed about the dating of the New Testament that the range of possible hypotheses was like a line of tipsy revellers with arms linked. They lurch this way and that, each piece kept in place by its neighbours, without encountering any solid object! Concerning today's efforts at deconstructing the New Testament, Tom Wright, one of Britain's leading New Testament scholars, uses an equally graphic metaphor. He says that it "is like finding yourself in the middle of a rugby field with five teams and 10 balls. There is all kinds of excitement: everybody is tackling everybody, and everyone thinks he's on the winning team."

Much of the focus of the debate is on the dating of the documents. However, is that the real issue? If the writers of the New Testament had reliable sources of information and if they were in some instances eye-witnesses of the events they describe, would it matter too much when they wrote them down? We read autobiographies of people who describe events that took place in their childhood 50 years previously (or hear them on radio)

without questioning the truth of those events. After all, *they were there when it happened* and they sound like honest people. The questions I would ask are: Do we have in the New Testament material that is written by people directly involved in the events they record? Where this is not the case, did they get it from eyewitnesses? If this is true, then surely it must carry more weight than the date of the final composition.

## **Eyewitness Testimony in the New Testament**

### **Matthew**

Matthew's gospel has been called "the most important book in the world" (Renan), and "the most successful book ever written" (Goodspeed). It occupies the first place in all early witnesses to the text of the four Gospels and in all early lists of the canonical books of the New Testament. Its suitability for defending Christian beliefs against attacks from Jewish opponents, for instructing converts from paganism and for reading in Christian worship made it the favourite gospel for Christian writers of the second century who quote it frequently. A work "so beautiful in design, so consistent in style, and so majestic in content" must rank in the forefront of world literature whoever the author and whatever the date.

Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis around 120-140 AD, recorded that "Matthew composed the writings in the Hebrew dialect [Aramaic] and everyone translated them as he was able." Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons towards the close of the second century and described as a hearer of the apostle John, asserted that this original document was written by Matthew while Peter and Paul were founding the church in Rome (the mid sixties). There is no other name that surfaces in the early church as a possible author. It would be hard to explain how, within a period of 60 or 80 years, the name of the true author of such a significant book could have been lost and a fictitious name substituted. The earliest tradition cannot be lightly set aside.

However, there are some problems. There is no record of an earlier Aramaic version and the Greek of Matthew does not appear to be a translation from Aramaic. Also the writer apparently makes considerable use of Mark's gospel and appears to use another written source that is also common to Luke. An explanation could well be that whoever wrote the final gospel as we have it today made free use of Matthew's writings as well as using other written sources. After that the original writings of Matthew in Aramaic went out of use and were lost. If this is so then the authorship and date of the final document are unknown, though scholars are always prepared to make their guesses.

There are hints in the gospel itself that some of the material that is not common to Mark or Luke could well have come from the pen of Matthew, the apostle who travelled with Jesus for about two and a half years. Matthew was a tax collector in Galilee, probably in the service of Herod Antipas. Of all the apostles, he would probably have been the most qualified to leave written records. At least he was accustomed to recording monetary transactions and may even have known a form of shorthand which was in reasonably common use in the first century.

There is no direct claim to the use of eyewitness material found in Matthew's gospel, as is found in Luke and John. If the early tradition of Matthew's authorship of at least some of the material is correct, then it is certainly there. The gospel is not lacking in vivid touches. However, my suggestion that we do indeed have eyewitness reporting here would take a different line. Matthew is supremely a *teaching* gospel. The author arranges his material not chronologically, but in blocks of teaching.

For instance, the so-called "Sermon on the Mount" occurs in chapters 5,6 and 7. I would ask any unbiased reader to read these three chapters through several times and to note the following: the remarkable moral challenge of this "sermon", its comprehensive nature, the personal claims made by its author, and the authority with which it is given. Also consider the courage it would take to proclaim such things. The character of the person that must lie behind such teaching fits perfectly with the character of Jesus that is presented to us consistently in the New Testament. Taking into account also the influence that this "sermon" has had in human history I find the idea that it did not come from the mouth of Jesus rather incredible. Similar statements could be made about much else that is in Matthew's gospel.

### **Mark**

I can see no good reason for rejecting the early tradition that comes to us from Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, that Mark is the author of the gospel attributed to him. It has certainly not been disproved. The quote that has come down to us from Papias also states that Mark got most of his information from Peter and that "his one care was this—not to leave out anything that he had heard, and not to falsify anything in them." If this is correct then we have a source very close to the original events.

Mark appears on several occasions in the story of the early church. We know his mother's home was in Jerusalem and became a meeting place for the first Christians (Acts 12:12). He went with Paul and his uncle Barnabas on their first missionary journey and later accompanied Barnabas on his separation from Paul. Apparently he later joined Paul in Rome and Paul

expresses his appreciation for his ministry. (Colossians 4:10, Philemon 24, 2 Timothy 4:11).

Whether Mark knew Jesus we do not know. He was probably a young man, perhaps in his teens, living in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death. That he had had some contact is certainly a real possibility. A fascinating detail is recorded in Mark's gospel in connection with the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Mark tells us, "**All of Jesus' disciples ran off and left him. One of them was a young man who was wearing only a linen cloth. And when the men grabbed him, he left the cloth behind and ran away naked**" (Mark 14:50,51). Why would Mark, alone of the gospel writers, want to tell of this young man, as it adds nothing to the significance of the events? I have a strong hunch that the young man was Mark himself. If so it would have been natural to include it. It certainly has an eyewitness touch about it.

Author Frank Morison at one time in his life had planned to write a monograph on the trial of Jesus. He intended to call it *Jesus the Last Phase*. He regarded Jesus as a legendary figure of purity and noble manhood, but nothing more. However, when he eventually studied the gospel writings he was confronted by the fact that his followers believed he had risen from the dead. Convinced by the evidence he eventually wrote instead *Who Moved the Stone?* Of Mark's Gospel he says:

*It arrests even the uncritical reader by the granite sharpness of its detail. And nowhere do we feel its realism more than in that strangely graphic description of the last hour of Christ's freedom. This is surely no merely literary creation of a secondary age...This is obviously a true history of that never-to-be-forgotten night. It spares no feelings, least of all those of the disciples themselves. It stands out as a stark and imperishable record of one of the master episodes of human history. And if there be one thing which clinches and confirms the veracity of the narrative it is surely that curiously irrelevant detail of the young man whose cloak was snatched from him in the struggle and who fled naked into the night. Why should we be told anything about this man except for the weighty and sufficient reason that the thing happened? The retreating figure of this naked youth is clearly one of the ineffaceable impressions of a dramatic five minutes which remained engraved deeply in the memory of everyone present.*

Whether or not Mark knew Christ personally, we may be sure that he counted amongst some of his closest friends those who did.

## Luke

Luke was an educated Greek, a doctor by profession. He wrote Luke and Acts which together account for two fifths of the New Testament. He covers the period from the birth of Christ into the first thirty years of the story of the early church, a period of 60 years. His writing gives a historical context for the rest of the New Testament.

### Luke's record as a historian

Luke's ability as a historian has been amply documented. There are numerous instances where he refers to rulers and historical events in his two books. These can be tested from other sources. It is interesting to note the number of times in which Luke has thought to have been wrong in the particular titles he has given to rulers in certain countries or cities and which later archaeological and other discoveries have proved to be right. Some examples are: reference to Philippian rulers as *praetors*, his choice of the word *proconsul* as the title for Gallio in Corinth, his describing of Publius as "the leading man of the island" in Malta, and his usage of *politarchs* to denote the civil authorities of Thessalonica (he gets no less than fifteen Roman governor titles right). Luke's accurate employment of the various titles used in the Roman Empire has been compared to the easy and confident way in which an Oxford man in ordinary conversation will refer to the Heads of Oxford colleges by their proper titles—the *Provost* of Oriel, the *Master* of Balliol, the *Rector* of Exeter, the *President* of Magdalen, and so on.

His accuracy in such details extends also to the more general sphere of local colour and atmosphere in such places as Jerusalem, Syrian Antioch, Philippi and Ephesus. He gets the atmosphere right every time. It is worth noting that the description of his sea voyage with Paul to Rome, and their shipwreck on Malta, in Acts 27, has been called "one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship" that we possess. There is, in fact, only one other document in existence that gives similar detail as to what sailing was like in those days. The eminent Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White said of Acts:

*Any attempt to reject its basic historicity, even in matters of detail, must now appear absurd.*

Classical scholar E. M. Blaiklock said of Luke:

*Luke is a consummate historian, to be ranked in his own right with the great writers of the Greeks.*

Luke's ability as a historian is evident, but does that quality extend to the things he tells us about Jesus? The respected British scholar F. F. Bruce makes the following pertinent comment:

*A man whose accuracy can be demonstrated in matters where we are able to test it is likely to be accurate even where the means for testing him are not available. Accuracy is a habit of mind...Luke's record entitles him to be regarded as a writer of habitual accuracy.*

### **Eyewitness testimony in Luke**

Although Luke never knew Jesus personally, he makes two specific claims: to have got his material from eyewitnesses and to have done his homework. He says the things he records were given to him **“by those who from the first were eyewitnesses”** and **“I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning”** (Luke 1:1-4).

It will be informative to briefly trace Luke's association with early Christians. In Acts there are three passages where, instead of saying that “Paul” did this, or “Paul” did that, he uses the term “we”. In other words he was with Paul at the time and describes events in which he was a participant. These “we” passages occur in chapters 16, 20, 21, 27 & 28. From these passages we know that Luke first met up with Paul in Troas on Paul's second missionary journey and travelled with him to Philippi. He joined Paul again in Macedonia on his third missionary journey and travelled back with him to Jerusalem. Two years later he travelled with Paul to Rome.

Certain historical references in Luke's writings allow us to date some of these happenings with a fair degree of accuracy. It is almost certain that it was 57 AD that he arrived in Jerusalem and probable that he stayed in Palestine for the two years that Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea. Whether he had been to Palestine before he first teamed up with Paul we do not know. We do know, however, that he spent time there about 27 years after Jesus was crucified.

Now a lot can happen in 27 years. However, one thing is certain. Many of the people who had known Jesus, including some of his inner circle of disciples, would still have been around. One of these was James, Jesus' half brother, born to Mary after Jesus. James was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem at this time. Later, about 61 AD, he was martyred, according to the Jewish historian Josephus. I can imagine Luke spending many hours with James, questioning him about his brother, and no doubt taking notes in the process!

Luke uses written sources in compiling the story of Jesus, as well as the oral accounts which he received from those who had known him. He quotes a good deal from Mark's gospel (as does Matthew). In fact he says in his first sentence that there were many written sources available (Luke 1:1). However, there are two sections in Luke that I have always thought to have

a very distinct eyewitness feel about them. The first is the section dealing with the events surrounding the birth and childhood of Jesus, told from Mary's point of view. The second is the story of Cleopas and his friend (maybe his wife) meeting with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus in chapter 24.

It is interesting that twice in the early chapters we read something very personal about Mary. **“Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”** (Luke 2:19) and **“his mother treasured all these things in her heart.”** (Luke 2:51). How did Luke know that? What is more natural than that it was Mary who told him the story? We have no record of when Mary died. If she was in her late teens when Jesus was born she would have been about 80 when Luke arrived in Jerusalem. This is possible. If not, then I would expect that it was from James, and possibly other family members, that Luke got these stories. Regarding the story in chapter 24 I would expect that Luke got this from Cleopas, because he is the one who is named in the story.

### **John**

John's gospel is the only gospel that specifically claims to be a direct eyewitness account. We have the plain statement at the end of the gospel concerning “the disciple that Jesus loved” that: **“This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true”** (John 21:24). This is probably an editorial comment added by someone closely associated with John.

There is plenty to support the fact that “the disciple that Jesus loved” is John himself. We know from the other gospels that the three apostles closest to Jesus were Peter, James and John. “The disciple that Jesus loved” cannot be Peter as he is mentioned together with Peter in several passages. Neither can he be James as he was martyred about 44 AD and there would scarcely be rumours going around that he would not die! (see John 21:23). That leaves John. There is plenty of internal and external evidence to back this up. He certainly proves to be very knowledgeable of Jerusalem and Jewish customs as they were before the destruction of the city in 70 AD. William Temple, the influential Archbishop of Canterbury, asserted in his *Readings in St. John's Gospel*:

*I regard as self-condemned any theory about the origin of the Gospel which fails to find a very close connection between it and John the son of Zebedee. The combination of internal and external evidence is overwhelming on this point.*

We can only guess at the reason why he used the term “the disciple that Jesus loved” of himself. Do we discern the hand of an editor to whom John told the stories and who wrote them down? Did he have a natural reserve about using his own name? Was it the wonderful sense of Jesus’ love that grew out of his close relationship with him over a period of three years?

John bears all the marks of having been written by one involved in the events recorded. In *The Man Born to be King*, Dorothy Sayers, who approached the subject from the standpoint of a creative artist, says of its claims to be an eyewitness testimony:

*...to anyone accustomed to the imaginative handling of documents, the internal evidence bears this out.*

John's gospel contains a good deal more conversation than the other gospels—conversation between Jesus and the disciples, Jesus and individuals or Jesus and the religious leaders. Could it be that this is simply because John was there and remembered what was said? I find it difficult to imagine that this is the sort of conversation that one would make up or get second hand. Franco Zeffirelli, who directed the film *Jesus of Nazareth* which cost \$25 million and took three years in the making, said of John:

*[His] accounts are often extraordinary, even from a purely dramatic viewpoint. There are certain scenes told by St. John which are perfect screenplays with dialogue. All we had to do was take his material and put it before the cameras.*

Even the miraculous narratives exhibit this quality of eyewitness testimony. For example, A. T. Olmstead, who was Professor of Ancient and Oriental History in the University of Chicago, finds the story of the raising of Lazarus (chapter 11) to have “all the circumstantial detail of the convinced eyewitness”, while the narrative of the empty tomb in chapter 20 is “told by an undoubted witness—full of life, and lacking any detail to which the sceptic might take justifiable objection.” It is my belief that in choosing the particular episodes from the life of Jesus that he does, John only selects events at which he was actually present. Maybe that is one of the reasons he gives a rather philosophical introduction to his gospel (John 1:1-18) rather than telling the stories of Jesus’ birth as do Matthew and Luke.

The most revealing evidence, however, that John was present, occurs in those passages where “the disciple that Jesus loved” is mentioned. This phrase occurs five times, at the last supper (13:23), at the cross (19:26), at the empty tomb (20:2) and when the risen Christ appears to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee (21:7,20). Each of these instances reveals something of his intimate relationship with Jesus. They are very special to him. Archbishop

William Temple comments on the story of Peter and this disciple running to the tomb and finding the grave clothes, but not the body:

*It is most manifestly the record of a personal memory. Nothing else can account for the little details, so vivid, so little like the kind of thing that comes from invention or imagination.*

The same could be said of the final appearance of the risen Jesus by the sea of Galilee that John records in chapter 21. There are vivid details here, such as Peter jumping overboard, that bear the marks of having been recorded by one who saw it. Why include the number of fish that were caught? I expect it was John who counted them!

Tradition has it that John wrote this gospel in his latter years. That may well be the case, but I would suggest that the kind of events that he records were so unique, and in most instances so dramatic, that he would have remembered them regardless of how long he lived. It is interesting that John devotes seven chapters to the events of the last 24 hours of Jesus' life and two more describing the resurrection appearances, that is about half his gospel! Of all the things that had impacted his life over the years surely the memories of those hours would remain with him forever.

Not only the gospel, but also three letters in the New Testament are credited to John. The majority of scholars affirm that at least the first of these is written by the same author as the gospel. In referring to Jesus as "the Word", as he does in his gospel, he says, "**That ...which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life**" (1 John 1:1). Maybe John was lucky, but for him seeing *was* believing. He did not need to quote other written sources.

## **Paul**

Paul is credited with the authorship of thirteen letters in the New Testament. No serious scholar denies his authorship of at least seven of these. They were written between about 50 AD and his martyrdom in Rome in the mid-sixties. There is no record that Paul had met or listened to Jesus prior to his crucifixion though he may well have been in Jerusalem at the time. However, it is certain that he would have known those who had. Jesus' brother James and Peter are listed among those he knew and there must have been many others.

Paul was a bigoted rabbi, violently opposed to the early Christians and to any suggestion that a condemned criminal could possibly be the promised Messiah. What was it that transformed him into one of the greatest Christian missionaries and writers of all time? Luke, one of his closest friends, tells us

in Paul's own words that it was because he had met the risen Christ (Acts 26: 12-18). Paul himself, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, after listing some of the people known to him to whom Christ had appeared after his resurrection, adds, "**last of all he appeared to me also**" (I Corinthians 15:8).

Have we any good reason to doubt Paul's integrity? It would be hard, if not impossible, to imagine writings that bear more the evidence of sincerity than Paul's. J. B. Phillips, who translated the New Testament into modern English, described his experience of translating Paul's letters as follows:

*...again and again the writer felt rather like an electrician, rewiring an ancient house, without being able to turn the mains off.*

### **Hebrews**

We do not know who wrote the New Testament letter commonly called Hebrews. Suggestions as to its date vary from the sixties to the eighties. Clement of Rome, in his Epistle to the Corinthian Church, written in AD 96 makes use of it. Though not an eyewitness the author claims that the message proclaimed by Jesus, "was confirmed to us by those who heard him." (Hebrews 2:3).

### **Other Writers of New Testament Letters**

There is not space here to go into questions raised by scholars as to the authorship of the letters ascribed to Peter, James and Jude. However, if 1 Peter was written by Peter the apostle of Jesus, as was universally accepted by the early church; if James was the brother of Jesus (born to Mary after Jesus) who became leader of the church in Jerusalem till his martyrdom in AD 61, as is probable; and if Jude was also a brother of Jesus as Clement of Alexandria stated, which he himself appears to claim in recording that he was a brother of James, and which many scholars accept; then we could not get closer to Jesus himself.

### **The Absence of Fictitious Material**

One other factor that argues strongly for the authenticity of the New Testament picture of Jesus is the total lack of fanciful material, or what is commonly called "myth" (using "myth" in the sense of fable or legend). Such content appears in some of the other Gospels that began to surface towards the end of the first century AD, and which the church rightly rejected. Many who work in the field of ancient literature have commented on this.

Archibald Rutledge has written:

*For more than 30 years it was my chief business in life to study and try to teach literature. To anyone earnestly so engaged there naturally comes a certain ability to distinguish the genuine from the spurious, the authentic*

*from the invented. Every time I read the gospel I am pressed more deeply with the conviction that the narratives concerning Christ do not belong to the realms of fancy, tradition or folklore...The incidents are such that they could never have been invented; and their effect on the world for 2,000 years has been such as no inventions could have produced. These stories possess that patent transparent validity that belongs only to truth.*

C. S. Lewis, who was professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at the University of Cambridge, wrote of his conversion to Christianity in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*:

*I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths. They had not the mythical taste...nothing else in all literature was just like this...And no person was like the Person it depicted; as real, as recognisable, through all the depths of time, as Plato's Socrates or Boswell's Johnson, yet also numinous, lit by a light from beyond the world, a god. But if a god—we are no longer polytheists—then not a god, but God. Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man.*

## **Conclusion**

In considering the historical reliability of the New Testament it is important to note a relevant saying of Jesus that John records at the Last Supper. It seems to me that this is often ignored by those who study these documents. **“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name...will remind you of everything I have said to you.”** (John 14:26). Could it be that Jesus really *did* say that, that he meant exactly what he said, and it happened as he said it would? He was concerned to see that we got an accurate record of who he was and what he had come to do.

Much of the New Testament is written by people who either knew Jesus, or knew very well those who did know him. If that is indeed the case, then to imagine that the picture we have of Jesus is as falsified as some would claim ignores the evidence. The so-called “gap” does not exist. Either he is the Lord of heaven and earth as he claimed to be, as his resurrection proves him to be, and as his committed followers have always believed him to be, or we have here the greatest hoax of history.

In his book, *The Ring of Truth*, J. B. Phillips tells of a radio interview he had with the distinguished classical scholar Dr. E. V. Rieu who was the scholar who translated Homer into very modern English for the “Penguin Classics”. Rieu had been sixty, and a lifelong agnostic when the same firm invited him to translate the Gospels. His son remarked: “It will be interesting to see what father makes of the four Gospels. It will be even more interesting

to see what the four gospels make of father." The answer was soon forthcoming. A year later Dr. Rieu, convinced and converted, joined the Church of England.

When Phillips asked him, "Did you not get the feeling that the whole material was extraordinarily alive?" Rieu replied, "I got the deepest feeling. My work changed me. I came to the conclusion that these words bear the seal of the Son of Man and God. And they're the Magna Carta of the human spirit."

Phillips concluded, "I found it particularly thrilling to hear a man who is a scholar of the first rank, as well as a man of wisdom and experience, openly admitting that these words written long ago were alive with power. They bore to him as to me, the ring of truth."

If Jesus is the eternal God who came to share our humanity and die for our sins, if he lives today to offer us forgiveness, his friendship through life and a future in his kingdom, and if he will one day be our judge as the records consistently declare, then we are foolish to ignore him. The question that Pilate put to the crowds at his trial is one that should concern us all, **"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?"** (Matthew 27:22). We will be the losers if we ignore it.

Michael Green, Adviser to the Archbishop of Canterbury for the Decade of Evangelism, who has had many years of experience in helping people find a vital faith, has this to say in an article he wrote for *Decision*:

*Time and again after discussing the Gospel with argumentative acquaintances, I have encouraged them to read with an open mind one of more of the four Gospels—a mind open to the possibility that God is real, that Christianity might be true. I ask them to pray before reading, even a prayer such as, "O God, if You exist, and I very much doubt whether You do, show me what truth there is in this stuff about Jesus. I am honestly willing to go where the evidence leads me."*

*Time after time I have found them in a Christian meeting a few weeks or months later. Smiling, they may say something like, "I did what you suggested, and I was convinced by the text itself. It has the ring of truth about it."*

Why not give it a try? Truth is hard to resist when faced honestly!