

A note from Nick...

This is the original version of a section in the book on the sources for a historical study of Jesus' last week. In the end, due partly to constraints of space and partly to the fact that it tended to slow the opening of the book down, I simplified this right down. But I'm making it available here as it contains a more in-depth argument about the veracity of some of the historical information. I've tried to resist the urge to rewrite the text; please note, therefore, this is from an earlier draft so hasn't been completely proof-read!

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The Sources

There are no official Roman or Jewish sources for the trial and execution of Jesus. Justin Martyr refers to official reports – *The Acts of Pilate* – but these have been long lost. The Early Church historian Eusebius mentions the *Acta Pilatii*, but the idea that it was presented by Tiberius before the Senate is clearly legendary.¹ There must, one presumes, have been some written report, but it has not survived.²

So what are our sources for this story?

The Gospels

The primary sources of information about Jesus, and, indeed, about first-century life in Palestine are the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

History, they say, is written by the winners. But it's important to note that at the time they were written the gospel writers hadn't won anything. They were part of an oppressed and frequently persecuted movement which was viewed with suspicion by large chunks of the Græco-Roman world. They sought to preserve the traditions that had been passed on from one Christian to the next. From the start people must have been compiling memories and sharing stories; some of that would undoubtedly have been in the form of oral tradition, stories

remembered and shared among the different communities, but a significant portion of it would also have been written down.

And, in setting at least, it would have sought to get things right. Many scholars today are dismissive of the gospel writers; they view them as inventors more than historians. The attitude of modern critical scholarship to these works is, I think, rampantly colonial, treating the writers and, indeed, the Early Church, as good natured, but essentially credulous and ignorant natives. *It's not that they weren't intelligent, bless them. They're doing their best. It's just that we know better.* So, from the vantage point of 2,000 years of history we dismiss their statements and disbelieve their testimony, and question every detail.

My contention is that, where it comes to historical details, they have the advantage over us – after all, they and their readers were actually alive at the time. They knew more than us about the world in which they lived. It's one thing to question whether or not a miracle occurred, but it's quite another thing to blithely state that something is historically impossible. So where there is doubt, the benefit of the doubt should go their way and not ours. There are points, clearly, where the gospel accounts clash with what else we know about Roman Palestine of the time. but there are plenty of points where they agree.

Indeed, accusations of inaccuracy in the historical details or terminology is not something I can find in any of the earliest critics of Christianity. Early critics of Christianity attacked their celebrations, their ritual, the claim of resurrection; not the historical details. Christians were charged with atheism, or with immoral lifestyles, or with seeking to undermine the rule of the emperor.³ They might have been charged with propogating a myth, but they were not charged with getting the details wrong about life in the Græco-Roman world. In fact, Justin Martyr uses the very historical facts to support his claims:

Our teacher of these things is Jesus Christ, who also was born for this purpose, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judaea, in the times of Tiberius Caesar;⁴

My point is that the early writings show us what were the objections to the Christian faith. And these objections were not on the level of historical inaccuracy. No one said ‘it couldn’t possibly have happened like that.’ They said ‘It couldn’t possibly have happened’ but that is a different objection. The story may be astonishing, or unbelievable; the details may be correct. It reminds me of G.K. Chesterton’s Father Brown who said that he could believe the impossible, but not the improbable:

Tell me that the great Mr. Gladstone, in his last hours, was haunted by the ghost of Parnell, and I will be agnostic about it. But tell me that Mr. Gladstone, when first presented to Queen Victoria, wore his hat in her drawing-room and slapped her on the back and offered her a cigar; and I am not agnostic at all. That is not impossible; it’s only incredible. But I’m much more certain it didn’t happen than that Parnell’s ghost didn’t appear; because it violates the laws of the world I do understand.⁵

To the early opponents of Christianity the problem was that Christianity claimed a violation of natural law, not a violation of local custom. The unnamed Jew in *Celsus* claims that ‘after we had convicted him [Jesus] as deserving of punishment, [he] was found attempting to conceal himself and endeavouring to escape in a most disgraceful manner.’⁶ But he doesn’t claim that Jesus wasn’t convicted because you couldn’t hold a trial at night time, or that Annas wasn’t technically in charge at the time. In other words, those much nearer the time did not question the historical details. It is scholars from more recent years – the nineteenth century onwards – who have made claims regarding the historicity of the events themselves.

All of which is not to say that there are not conflicts in the writer’s accounts. There are some notable differences, not least between the three synoptic gospels and John over the dating of the actual events. Between the gospels events happen in different orders. Mark puts the ‘cleansing’ of the Temple on the day after Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, Matthew and Luke seem to imply that it was on the same day. There are events in one not reported in another. John has long speeches of Jesus which

don't occur elsewhere.

But despite these difference they do give a generally coherent and cogent account. They set it in a world that will be shown to operate according to a reasonably common sense set of laws.

So the gospels will be our primary witnesses.

A note on the names

One of the reasons that the four gospels were selected to be part of the scriptures of the early church is that they claimed a direct link with those who had witnessed events. None of the gospels are attributed within the text (with the exception of John although he calls himself 'the beloved disciple') but the Early Church believed them to be by people who had known Jesus or someone close to Jesus. Mark was believed to be the work of John Mark and based on material that he had heard from Peter; Matthew the work of Matthew the Tax collector and one of Jesus's followers. The gospel of Luke was part of a two-part history of Jesus and the early Church written by an associate and colleague of Paul. John, as we have seen either John the apostle or another disciple called John the Elder.

Although this authorship has been widely challenged, there is evidence that the Early Church was very concerned about the chain of contact. An early Church witness called Papias, writing about the end of the first century wrote:

Mark, indeed, having been the interpreter of Peter; wrote accurately, howbeit not in order, all that he recalled of what was either said or done by the Lord. For he [Mark] neither heard the Lord, nor was he a follower of His, but at a later date (as I said), of Peter... For he [Mark] kept a single aim in view: not to omit anything of what he heard, nor to state anything therein falsely.⁷

Papias was concerned with authenticity:

But I will not hesitate also to set down for thy benefit along with the interpretations, all that I carefully learnt and carefully recalled from the elders, guaranteeing its truth... And if anyone chanced to come [to Papias's town or church] who had actually been a follower of the elders, I would enquire as to the discourses of the elders, what

Andrew of what Peter said, or what Philip, or what Thomas of James, or what John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples; and the things which Aristion and John the Elder, disciples of the Lord, say.⁸

So we should not dismiss out of hand the traditional authorship of these books. In this book, however, I will be talking about 'Mark's account' and 'John's account' because (a) I think there's a lot to be said for the authenticity of the Early Church attributions and (b) it's a damned sight easier than to keep saying 'the gospel attributed to Mark, the gospel though to be written by John, etc.' However you don't have to believe that Matthew was actually written by Matthew in order to believe the contents. Your mileage, as they say, may vary.

The Synoptics

The first three of this group – Matthew, Mark and Luke – are usually grouped together and called the 'synoptic' gospels, from the Latin *syn*=one and *optic*=seeing. They see events, broadly speaking, from one perspective; the overall shape of their narrative is the same and much of the material is shared.

The general consensus is that Mark was the earliest of the gospels, and material from Mark was used in the writing of Luke and John.

Out of these three gospels, Mark alone attempts a day-by-day chronology, using a series of chronological markers for the week (e.g. 'On the following day' (Mk 11.12), 'In the morning'(Mk 11.20); 'It was two days before the Passover' (Mk 14.1), etc.). He also gives the timing during the Friday, breaking the action down into three hour sections. It starts at dawn ("As soon as it was morning," Mark 15.1) then 'nine o'clock in the morning' (Mk 15.25), noon (15.33), three pm (15.34) and evening (15.42).

The Gospel of John

John's account is very different to the other three gospels and is generally assumed to have been written later. The author is only identified in the text as 'the beloved disciples', however the Ear-

ly Church almost unanimously agreed it was written by a man called John. The three letters (really two letters) in the New Testament attributed to John were also written by this person.

One of the big criticisms of John is that his style is so different to the other gospels. And indeed it is. Even a cursory glance will reveal John to be more voluble, more wordy. But the wordiness or mysticism of John tends to be restricted to Jesus's speech. When it comes to describing events he is careful and clear. And, as we shall see, there are many points where John gives us important details which are otherwise missing.

Richard Bauckham has suggested that the author was a Jerusalem-based disciple of Jesus, but not one of the twelve apostles.⁹ We know that Jesus had many followers; in addition to the twelve apostles, the Bible talks of another group of 72, plus followers such as women, people in Jerusalem, etc. This would account for the difference between John and the other gospels. Whereas the synoptics are drawn from material from Jesus's core inner circle of twelve, John's account comes from a different perspective, from the view of the wider circle of Jesus's followers. This gives John's gospel a valuable perspective from the historian's point of view.

Paul's account

There is one more New Testament account that we can call as a witness: the letters of Paul. these are in fact, the earliest Christian documents – earlier than the gospels. In them we find references to Jesus's last week, although not a complete account. What we gain from Paul – and Paul's letters are the earliest of the New Testament documents – is an idea of what was being taught in the early Church about the trial, death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul certainly mentions Jesus's trial before Pontius Pilate (1Tim 6.13); also the Last Supper and the fact that the 'rulers' crucified Jesus (1Cor 2.8). He passes on a tradition about the Last Supper and a list of people who saw the resurrected Jesus.

Josephus and Philo

So much for the Biblical witnesses. Outside the scriptures, the main witness is the first century Jewish historian, Josephus.

Josephus was a Jew who, following the disastrous rebellion by the Jews in 67–70 AD moved to Rome and wrote a history of both the war and his Jewish people. He finished this around 93–4 AD. Josephus is valuable for the many incidental details he records of life in Jerusalem and Judaea around the time of Christ. He gives us masses of useful information about the atmosphere of Judaea at the time. Josephus lived in the region: he saw the Temple in action, and he was involved in the political activity of his day. He may be inconsistent at times, and he's certainly prone to exaggeration of numbers and to quite a bit of pro-Roman spin. But beneath that there is a real account of the times from someone who was actually there.¹⁰ He also mentions some of the key figures in the longest week, including Pilate and Caiaphas. And he also writes this about Jesus:

Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works—a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. [He was [the] Christ;] and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, [for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him;] and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.¹¹

The passages in square brackets are almost definitely interpolations by a later Christian scribe, keen to do a bit of PR work on behalf of Jesus. Nevertheless, without the adulatory material, this is a powerful testimony to some of the key factors in the story of Jesus: his arrest and execution, the role of the Jewish leaders and Pilate in his death and the survival of the 'tribe of Christians'.¹²

Another Jewish source, whom I will be quoting is a writer called Philo, a Jew who lived in Alexandria from c.20 BC to c.50 AD.

Philo produced a great many works of literature, theology and philosophy as well as writings which dealt with some of the major historical issues of his day.

Tacitus

The Roman historian Tacitus, is another key witness. Although he does not mention the trial of Jesus as such, writing in 100 AD, he gave this account of Nero's persecution of Christians:

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate...

Where he got this information from is unknown. He might have got it from Josephus, but Tacitus hated Judaism, so is unlikely to have scoured Josephus's *Antiquities* for what is, at best, a piece of incidental information. It may well be that he took this from official Roman sources of information.¹³

The Mishnah

There is an enormous amount of Rabbinic literature – works compiled by Rabbis. The most important work is probably the Mishnah, which represents the vast collection of oral law which had been accumulated by the Rabbis as they debated and discussed the Tanakh, (the Hebrew Bible) and the law of the Torah (the Pentateuch or first five books of what Christians call the Old Testament).

There are a few things to note about the Mishnah.

First, its finished form was arrived at around 200 AD – some 170 years after the events we are looking at here and 130 years after the Temple was destroyed. That means that its historical accuracy is open to argument to say the least. If we question the historicity of the gospel accounts, the latest of which was written 50–60 years after the events it describes, we must also counsel caution in dealing with literature which was written over a century after that.

A little bit of background might be helpful here. In 67 AD the Jews revolted against Roman rule. After initial successes,

the Romans eventually besieged Jerusalem with 30,000 troops. The suffering and sickness and general internal warfare within Jerusalem was awful. In the end, in 70 AD, the city was recaptured and the Temple was completely destroyed. The Jews rebelled again in 130 AD under a leader called Bar Kochba. Again, they were successful at first, but eventually the Roman military machine proved too powerful. After the second revolt Jews were expelled from Jerusalem completely. They took up residence elsewhere in Judaea and Galilee, notably in Tiberias, on the shores of Lake Galilee. It was there, or around there, that the Mishnah was compiled.

So the Mishnah is a book that is shot through with a certain sense of loss. When it talks about the Temple or the celebration of Passover in Jerusalem, it does so in the knowledge that these things are gone. The Mishnah accounts of Temple worship, sacrifice, taxes, council meetings, etc. reflect a world that has been irretrievably lost. There is, therefore, probably a degree of wistful idealisation in the accounts.

Second, there is a degree of theological bias. Although the traditions reflect different schools, such as the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel, they do come from the 'heirs' to the Pharisees of the first century. So the Rabbinic literature reflects a Pharisaic worldview, indeed, probably an *idealized* Pharisaic worldview. There may well be cases where the Mishnah reflects not Jerusalem and Judaea as it was, but how the later Pharisaical editors thought it must – or even should – have been.¹⁴

As Tal Ilan wrote:

Although Rabbinic literature creates – or tries to create – the impression that it describes the behaviour of all Jews, in actuality it describes only the various stages of Pharisaic halakhah [Jewish religious law] after the destruction. Although in the Middle Ages these texts served as the prescriptive norm in large parts of the Jewish world, in the period in which they were composed, and to which they refer, the same norm was the actual way of life for only a limited group of men and women.¹⁵

Having said all that, there is lots in the Rabbinic writings to illuminate the time of Jesus.

Apocryphal Gospels

Finally we have the apocryphal gospels, that is Christian writings which are outside of the New Testament and date, on the whole, from much later.

Despite the claims of various academics, novelists and filmmakers there is very little in these works of historical value about the life of Jesus. They were not written near the time, nor by eye-witnesses. They are useful in shedding light on the beliefs and practices of certain minority sects of Christianity in the late second century, but they tell us little new about Jesus. It seems to me to be sheer willful perversity to think that something like the *Gospel of Judas*, written centuries after the event by someone peddling their own brand of Christianity, could possibly tell us more than the Mark's gospel written, at the most, forty years after the events (and in some peoples' opinion a great deal closer).

Gospel of Peter

The one text that is often cited as showing evidence of a different tradition is the so-called *Gospel of Peter*. Only a fragment of this work exists, starting at the end of the trial and showing Jesus's mockery, crucifixion and burial and resurrection. The fragment ends with Peter, Andrew, and Levi, discovering the empty tomb and setting off for the Sea of Galilee (cf. John 21). The implication is that the main issue was Jesus's threats against the Temple and his claims to be the Son of God.¹⁶

The *Gospel of Peter* is a late second century attempt to rewrite history. In particular it is keen to exculpate Pilate and pin all the blame on the Jews. Jesus is condemned, for example, not by Pilate, but by Herod Antipas, a man who had no jurisdiction in Jerusalem at the time. Actions which elsewhere in the other gospels are done by Roman soldiers, are, in the Gospel of Peter, attributed to Jewish soldiers. The gospel comes from around

200 AD; certainly its not mentioned before around 190 AD.¹⁷

Why does this gospel matters? Well, one scholar has claimed to be able to trace in it fragments of a much earlier passion narrative. John Dominic Crossan in a study in 1988 claimed that hidden within the gospel of Peter fragment was an early account of Jesus's death which Crossan called the 'Cross Gospel'.¹⁸ Crossan claimed that this account dated from around 40 AD and was the source which Mark (and Matthew and Luke) used for their gospels. It has to be said there is hardly any support for this theory.¹⁹

The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of Jesus's sayings dating from the mid-second century. It may preserve early sayings of Jesus, perhaps very early sayings of Jesus, but is a later work.²⁰

The Gospel of Judas

This work, spectacularly announced as an exclusive by the National Geographic Society claimed to offer new insights into the motivation and character of the notorious Judas Iscariot. In fact, it dates from around the late third century and the translation published by National Geographic contains some serious inaccuracies.²¹ The *Gospel of Judas* tells us something about third century Gnosticism, and quite a lot about marketing and PR in the twenty-first century. But it tells us nothing about the events of Jesus's day.

Oxyrhynchus Papyri 840

There is one more fragment of parchment from an Egyptian rubbish dump which relates an incident between Jesus and a Pharisaical chief priest in the Temple. I will be treating this at more length later on.

- 1 Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, trans. Hugh Jackson Lawlor And John Ernest Leonard Oulton (2 vols; London: SPCK, 1927), I, 38. Various other ‘Acts’ and ‘Letters’ of Pilate are recorded, but they are all pious forgeries from the fourth century.
- 2 Ernst Bammel, and C. F. D Moule, ed. *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 173.
- 3 Esler, Philip Francis, *The Early Christian World*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 525–51.
- 4 Justin, and Leslie W Barnard, *The First and Second Apologies*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 31.
- 5 In ‘The Curse of the Golden Cross’ Chesterton, G. K, *The Father Brown Stories*, (London: Cassell, 1929), 708.
- 6 Origen *Contra Celsus* 2.9. Cited in Bammel, Ernst, and C. F. D Moule, *The Trial of Jesus : Cambridge Studies in Honour of C. F. D. Moule*, (London: SCM, 1970), 30.
- 7 Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, trans. Lawlor, H.J., and Oulton, J.E.L., (London: SPCK, 1927), I, 101.
- 8 Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, I, 99.
- 9 Bauckham, Richard, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006)
- 10 Goodman, Martin, *The Ruling Class of Judaea : The Origins of the Jewish Revolt Against Rome, A.D. 66-70*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 5.
- 11 Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63
- 12 Schürer, Emil, Fergus Millar, Géza Vermès, and Martin Goodman, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973), I, 432ff.. Schürer argues that Josephus wrote more about Jesus than appears, but that the extra material has been lost.
- 13 Légasse, Simon, *The Trial of Jesus*, (London: SCM Press, 1997), 2–3.
- 14 Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea*, 23.
- 15 Ilan, Tal, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine : An Inquiry Into Image and Status*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1995), 34.
- 16 See *Gos. Peter* 6–9, 26, 45–46
- 17 *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1999), V, 172–77.
- 18 Crossan, John Dominic, *The Cross that Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), xii–xiv
- 19 See Wright, N. T, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (London: SPCK, 2003), 592–96.
- 20 See Perrin, Nicholas, *Thomas : The Other Gospel*, (London: SPCK, 2007).
- 21 See DeConick, April D. “Gospel Truth”, *New York Times*. December 1, 2007.