

CHAPTER 3

CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

The Meaning of Credibility

Credible means trustworthy, accurate (as to facts, events, etc.). A credible writing would be a writing that possessed enough reliability in respect to its statements of history that the reader could trust what was said. Further, in areas where the reader could not prove the statements made by the author, the reliability of the "provable" statements would enhance the probability the "unprovable" statements were to be accepted as truthful.

I. The Need for the Discussion

There are many historical references in the New Testament. Such statements will come under the same scrutiny of those investigating its claims as any other books with historical statements. In this sense, then, the New Testament books are to be considered from the same perspective that any other book of history would be considered. It seems apparent that God intended it to be so. If Christianity is anything, it is a historical religion. As Paul remarked to Agrippa, "It was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). God intended that the one searching for truth could and would find adequate reason for faith and, thus, did not exclude the religion of Jesus from the marketplace

of life. Times, places, events: these make up history. Christianity is very much history!

We may well add, however, that the books, and especially the Gospels, are in some respects unique. For instance, though they are historical in nature, yet they are also biography, and also revelation. The overriding purpose is not just a record of facts, but the record of God's revelation in Christ through those who made up the body of Christ. Hence, though we may well use normal criteria for investigation, such criteria are only guides, not laws.

Credibility then applies to statements of fact, such as may be found in the New Testament. The statements of fact may be considered under various headings, such as:

- 1) ordinary history
- 2) miraculous events(s)
- 3) reports of speeches
- 4) various revelations which the writers claim to have received from God.

Credibility will ask: how do we know the "said events" took place?

II. Rules of Credibility

As in every inquiry into the credibility of writers, there are certain ways it is to be done, or rules which one is to use. In consideration of these facts, the following general rules are given, by which one may consider this subject:

Rule 1: Contemporary writers who have opportunity for personal knowledge of the facts in question, or on the same general subject, are to be considered first. Public records, monuments and inscriptions, as well as histories and personal letters, are included under this rule. Obviously, the concurrent testimony of independent writers, contemporary with the events recorded, greatly increases the probability of the truthfulness about an event or of an author. Of course, if the writers agree when one incidentally mentions what another elaborates in detail, or mentions a circumstance incidentally explained by another, so much the better. Hence, contemporary writers possess the first and highest degree of credibility.

Rule 2: The next source of information to be considered would be writers who received their information from eye witnesses. Said

writers would be helpful in determining the matter(s) in question. They would possess the second degree of credibility.

Rule 3: An author who lives in an age later than the events in question, whose sources of information were through persons or records other than those contemporary, should next be considered. Such authors would have the last degree of credibility.

Rule 4: If the events and/or facts in question affected national life or were of general public knowledge, or were commemorated by some public observation(s), this would enhance the credibility of the author in question. In addition, if said events were corroborated in any way by people of another land or culture, this should also be considered, since it greatly increases the probability of the correctness of the author.

Naturally, one considers all of the above guidelines from the perspective that the authors are independent, and not working in collusion with one another. If the authors in question are writing for different purposes, or are antagonistic to each other, etc., these facts also must be considered, as such would increase the probability that they were not necessarily writing to substantiate the other accounts.

A. *THE NEW TESTAMENT AUTHORS*

A general application of these rules of the writers of the New Testament would reveal the following information: all writers who were eye witnesses of the events which they record would fall under Rule 1. Matthew, John, Luke (portions of Acts), Paul, James and Peter were eye witnesses of some or all events which they record. Mark, Luke and any of the above writers who did not witness events which they recorded, would fall under Rule 2, since they were not eye witnesses, but had access to information to those who were (this, of course, assumes that we have proven our case for the traditional authorship in Chapter Two).

In regard to the authors mentioned above, the general moral character of the men will be considered in due course as we consider the various facts which they narrate. However, we would remind the reader that the men generally considered to have written these books claim to be followers of Jesus. This means that they were writing about a man who claimed to be the truth, and, in addition, would have little, if any, reason to lie about the facts which they record.

From this perspective, we begin our inquiry into the various areas previously mentioned.

III. Agreement with Other Writings

One method of testing the credibility of a writer is to compare his statements with other writers who have similar opportunities for information. If the writers agree in regard to a matter of fact or thought, etc., and neither writer obtained his information from the other, Rule 1 is applicable. If said writers disagree about a matter, several possibilities exist. For instance, one or both may be incorrect. They may not have the same fact in mind in the same way; or we may simply misunderstand.

In relationship to the New Testament writers, very few contemporary writers are available to us who speak about the same events (as the New Testament writers), or who possess the necessary information to speak with accuracy. The following writers, contemporary with our New Testament, are the principal ones of interest: 1) Josephus, 2) Tacitus, and 3) Pliny.

McGarvey has a footnote from Renan who comments about the sparsity of material from Roman writers as follows:

“As to the Greek and Latin writers, it is not surprising that they paid little attention to a movement which they could not comprehend, and which was going on within a narrow space foreign to them. Christianity was lost to their vision upon the dark background of Judaism. It was only a family quarrel among the subjects of a degraded nation; why trouble themselves about it?”

From this perspective, then, we approach the information which we may glean from these writers.

A. JOSEPHUS

He gives an extensive coverage of his life and times, including justification for the various ways the Jewish people acted. If, however, we expected him to give an account which would include something about Jesus and the early Church life, especially as it included the Jews, we would be disappointed. Perhaps the following reasons would help us understand why:

- a) his own religious background as a Jew, and as a Pharisee, might have kept him from saying what he might otherwise have said, or

- b) any truthful account of Jesus and/or of the Church would have been likewise a story indicting the Jewish people generally and the religious sects as the Pharisees specifically.

His basic motivation for his history was to elevate the Jewish people in the eyes of the Greeks and Romans. Hence, probably national pride and personal bigotry precluded the truth about Jesus and the Church. However, he does mention some items found within the New Testament history.

1. HEROD AND HERODIAS. Josephus attempts to state the cause of the war between Herod Antipas and Aretas, who was king of Arabia. In doing so, he relates the fact that Herod Antipas induced Herodias to leave Philip, her legal husband and his brother, to come live with him. The synoptic writers each mention the fact of this marriage between Herod and Herodias in connection with the death of John the Immerser, though they omit the details which Josephus gives. This would be a clear case of undesigned agreement between totally independent writers.

2. JOHN THE IMMERSER. Josephus records that Herod's army was destroyed in the war with Aretas; and states that some Jews regard the destruction as a punishment for the murder of "John who was called the Immerser." John is referred to as a "good man" who "commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness toward one another and piety toward God and so to come to immersion." He remarks about the meaning of John's message, and also relates that Herod, who feared that John might cause a rebellion, imprisoned him in Machaerus, finally beheading him. While the Gospels record the basic events mentioned by him, the differences in the accounts show that he is totally independent of the Synoptics.

3. THE DEATH OF JAMES. Luke records that there was a James who was a central figure in the church at Jerusalem. Josephus recounts the death of this James, calling him the brother of Jesus who was called Messiah. He introduces these two names in his history in such a way that shows clearly he considered them well-known to his readers. Thus, his assumption that Jesus was historically known throughout the world accords with that impression which the Scriptures give.

B. TACITUS

Considered to be one of the most reliable of writers, as well as one of the better-known authors of the day, we glean the following items of information from his history:

1. NERO'S PERSECUTION. Tacitus refers to Nero's persecution of Christians which occurred during the partial burning of the city of Rome, and in so doing, reveals the following bits of information:

- a) People called Christians lived in Judea before the death of Christ, deriving their name from his,
- b) Jesus was crucified during the reign of Pontius Pilate,
- c) belief in Christ was checked for a time by his death, but soon rose again,
- d) that such belief spread through Palestine and ultimately to Rome,
- e) where there was a vast multitude of Christians at the time of the fire (A.D. 64),
- f) who were accused by Nero of causing the fire and were cruelly punished by him,
- g) but their sufferings, regarded by many as unjust, provoked sympathy for them.

Since this information comes from a witness not in sympathy with the New Testament, the facts which he related are of considerable importance. In fact, the gist of the New Testament historical record is verified by his remarks (if such a hostile witness could know so much about New Testament events, who yet lived apart from the place where most of them occurred, it would seem obvious that Josephus did not record all that he knew), though the fact that Tacitus did not look with favor upon Christians is understandable, if he espoused the idea that they were rebellious citizens and/or causes of trouble.

C. PLINY

This man, like Tacitus, is well-known for his writing, most especially for that to Tacitus, a friend and correspondent. Appointed as proconsul (under the Roman Senate) to Bithynia under Emperor Trajan, he was perplexed as to how he should handle the governmental persecution then in progress. A letter to Trajan concerning the matter reveals the following information:

- a) A vast number of Christians lived in Bithynia, in every strata of culture,
- b) who, on a stated day, were accustomed to hold two meetings, one for singing, etc., and the other to eat a "harmless meal,"
- c) whose teaching had so influenced the people that the heathen temples were mostly destroyed, and there was hardly any market for heathen sacrifices put up for sale,
- d) that the persecution involved so many people he thought it wise to suspend the persecution until further instruction,
- e) that the Christians, though tortured for "a confession," yet had no vices, but suffered solely for the name of being Christian (which caused Pliny to doubt the justness of the persecution),
- f) some Christians were Roman citizens who were accordingly sent to Rome.

As with the account of Tacitus, Pliny shows that the basic facts and doctrine contained in the New Testament were believed and taught among the early Christians, as well as incidents concerning other historical notes (such as Acts 25 and I Peter 4).

Each of the preceding writers would be classified as independent and unfriendly to the cause of Christ. Yet each of them testify to facts found within the New Testament, and yet give such testimony under no constraint (or perhaps even unknowingly). We could only wish that the items of agreement had been more numerous, since the points of agreement would have doubtless extended proportionately. It is right to remark that, should we have found some discrepancies between these two classes of writers, at least the preference should belong to the writers of the New Testament, as they were better informed in the main subject.

D. OTHER HISTORIES

A book entitled, *Christian Preachers Companion*, in part authored by Alexander Campbell, has a compilation of material from various writers of the apostolic age and immediately following it. Mr. Campbell discusses in some detail the various authors, showing how each one testifies to some fact or facts recorded on the pages of the New Testament. He then summarizes the testimony of the various men, which summary is now pertinent for our study, as it shows that

the New Testament writers related facts and events that are true beyond dispute. Mr. Campbell considers the following authors (among others): Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny (the Younger), the Roman emperors Adrian and Antoninus the Pious, Lucian of Samosata, Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian the Apostate. He brings out the fact that one of the main points brought up by unbelievers is that the biographies of Jesus were done by those who were his friends, and the same being true concerning the early history of the church. He well points out, though such is true, that is no good reason to disbelieve the writers. The testimony from a friend is not necessarily to be disbelieved; rather it is to be considered on its historical merits, etc., as are all other records. He further points out, as the following summary will show, that the fidelity and credibility of the New Testament authors is substantiated from writers who were antagonistic to the Christian faith. Moreover, he points out that almost all of the arguments of the unbelieving writers of the first two centuries of the Christian era were directed at the writings we now consider to be our New Testament. The following summary is then given to substantiate the preceding statements:

1. That the Jew's religion preceded the Christian, is of the highest antiquity, and distinguished by peculiarities the most extraordinary from every other ancient or modern religion.
2. That John the Baptist appeared in Judea, in the reign of Herod the Great, a reformer and a preacher of singular pretensions, or great sanctity of life, and was well received by the people; but was cruelly and unjustly murdered in prison by Herod the Tetrarch.
3. That Jesus, who is called the Messiah, was born in Judea, in the reign of Augustus Caesar, of a very humble and obscure woman, and amidst a variety of extraordinary circumstances.
4. That he was, while an infant, on account of persecution, carried into Egypt, but was brought back again into the country of his nativity.
5. That there were certain prophetic writings of high antiquity, from which it had been inferred that a very extraordinary personage was to arise in Judea, or in the East, and from thence to carry his conquests over the whole earth.
6. That this person was generally expected all over the East about the time in which the gospel began to be preached.
7. That Jesus, who is called Christ, taught a new and strange doctrine.
8. That by some means he performed certain wonderful and supernatural actions in confirmation of his new doctrine.
9. That he collected disciples in Judea, who, though of humble birth and very low circumstances, became famous through various parts of the Roman Empire, in consequence of the progress of the Christian doctrine.

10. That Jesus Christ was the founder of a new religion, now called the Christian religion.

11. That while Pontius Pilate was governor in Judea, and Tiberius emperor at Rome, he was publicly executed as a criminal.

12. That this new religion was then checked for a while.

13. That, by some strange occurrence not mentioned, it broke out again and progressed with the most astonishing rapidity.

14. That in the days of Tacitus there was in the city of Rome an immense number of Christians.

15. That these Christians were, during the reign of Nero, or about thirty years after the death of Christ, persecuted to death by that emperor.

16. That constancy (called obstinacy by some pagan governors) in maintaining the heavenly and exclusively divine origin of their religion is the only crime proved against the Christians, as appears from all the records of their enemies, on account of which they suffered death.

17. That in the year 70, or before those who had seen Jesus Christ had all died, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Romans, and all the tremendous calamities foretold of that time by Moses and Christ were fully visited upon that disobedient and gainsaying people.

18. That the Christians made a confession of their faith, and were baptized, and met at stated times to worship the Lord.

19. That in their stated meetings they bound themselves, by the solemnities of their religion, to abstain from all moral evil, and to practice all moral good.

20. That the communities which they established were well organized, and were under the superintendence of bishops and deacons.

21. That Jews, Gentiles, barbarians, of all castes, and persons of every rank and condition of life, at the risk and sacrifice of the friendship of the world, or property, and of life, embraced this religion and conformed to all its moral and religious requisitions.

"These specifications, independent of all that is quoted by Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian, from Old or New Testament, in their proper import and connections, do fully contain all the peculiar elements of the Christian religion, as displayed and enforced on the pages of the New Institution. These constitute the skeleton of the New Testament. Were we to clothe these bones with the summaries which we have given out of Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian, . . . we should have the whole frame of the Christian institution, differing only in color from that found in the Book. The color of these facts and documents consists in the interpretation of them. Of course the twelve apostles of the Messiah interpret them differently from those witnesses whose testimony we have just now heard. The difference of the interpretation, however, all men of sense will admit, affects not the proposition before us, viz: that the testimony of our apostles is fully sustained in all the leading facts, by all the ancients of the first and second centuries who have at all spoken of, or alluded to, the Christian religion."

As we have previously stated, the use of testimony obtained from various writers is of different value, depending upon whether it is

intentional, accidental, etc. The historical period covered by our New Testament was approximately one hundred years, beginning with the time of Zachariah and Elizabeth, ending with John's letters and the Revelation. During that period, various events occurred which were necessarily important in Bible history, though they may not have demanded more than passing notice. Hence, we may find many incidental agreements within our New Testament to writings of the time which will help us consider how credible the writers in question are.

E. NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS

Consider then the following items mentioned on the pages of our New Testament:

- 1) Matthew 2:1, Herod the King, who dies,
- 2) Archelaus reigns in his father's place,
- 3) Matthew 14:1, Herod the Tetrarch (the King) puts John to death,
- 4) Acts 12:1, Herod the king, who kills James, and then dies,
- 5) Archelaus is said to be king of Judea, Matthew 2; and Pilate is governor of Judea, Matthew 27;
- 6) Luke 3 begins with the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar; yet many years later Paul makes his appeal to Caesar, Acts 25,
- 7) Luke 3 calls our attention to the fact that there were two high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, though John and the Synoptics sometimes present Caiaphas as the only High Priest, John 11, Mark 14,
- 8) the apostle Paul is presented as a Jew, but also claims Roman citizenship, Phil. 3, Acts 22.

These items present the possibility of many points of reference, and the means of verifying the credibility of the writers in question. Little if any explanation is given by the authors as to the events or people which they list, and sometimes they seem to be in contradiction with what could be known from other parts of the Bible. For example, the Old Testament stipulated but one High Priest, and that for life. Our Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us that Annas was the rightful High Priest, but that he had been deposed by a Roman governor, who subsequently appointed first one and then another as High Priest. Caiaphas was the fourth so appointed; therefore, as far as the Jewish people were concerned, they had to recognize two high priests.

In reference to the various people called Herod, a glance at the chart at the end of this chapter will show there are many Herods, though all were related.

Roman historians will show that there were governors of Judea at the same time there were kings. They will also show us that after the first Herod (the Great, of Matt. 2) died, his kingdom was divided up among his sons, who were each given a part. Herod the Tetrarch then refers to one of the sons of Herod who ruled a part (a fourth part) of his father's kingdom. We will discover also that Archelaus was soon deposed by the Roman government, and a governor appointed in his place, who appointed high priests as he chose. We also learn that one could be both Jewish and yet Roman (as Acts 22 also shows). That the name "Caesar" was applied to more than one man is plain.

Over and over again, men have discovered that the New Testament writers were correct in their historical, cultural and geographical representation. Some of these items will be discussed later, and a list of books at the end of the chapter will give additional reading for this area of study.

1. THE ENROLLMENT AND QUIRINIUS. As an example of a matter in which Luke (Ch. 2) has been charged with error in past years, this historical reference was often cited. Luke reports the fact that:

- a) Augustus Caesar ordered an enrollment prior to the birth of Jesus, that
- b) it was made during the period when Quirinius was governor of Syria, and
- c) that each Jewish family was to be enrolled in their own city.

Over the years, men insisted that (Augustus) Caesar made no such decree. The fact of the matter is that enrollments were made on a 14-year cycle beginning about 20 B.C. and continuing thereafter. It has been recently shown, further, that Quirinius was in some relationship to Syria at least two different times in his life (it had long been held that he had only been governor of Syria one time and that too late for the birth of Jesus). There are various extensive discussions of this matter in recent commentaries which show that Luke is accurate in his statement concerning Quirinius. *The New International Commentary* by Geldenhuis on Luke, pgs. 104-106, is typical. We remark further that the argument is basically from silence since there is no proof that Caesar did not issue such a decree. The

facts of the general enrollments indicate otherwise. Moreover, the Jews may have been enrolled according to their customs, which would be enrollment by geneological families. This fact would show why Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem, just as the account states.

2. SPEECH OF GAMALIEL. A second basic accusation made against Luke was in reference to the speech of Gamaliel in Acts 5. Gamaliel is reported as saying a man named Theudas preceded one named Judas of Galilee. These facts are said to be in opposition to Josephus, who describes a Theudas who lived much later than the Judas of Galilee. We first remark that Josephus is not without error in his history, and there is no particular reason to take his word in preference to Luke. Moreover, Josephus does not say that there was only one Theudas. He does relate, as also substantiated by Roman historians, that there were many tumults and uprisings in Judea at the time in question. Since we have no assertion about Theudas 1 to the contrary from him, but rather silence, we see no reason to doubt Luke's testimony.

IV. General Matters

There are several ways to check the credibility of a writer as we have before stated. Many critics of the past years have asserted that the New Testament books were not written by the traditional authors, but by others at a later date. One of the reasons that such assertions are of doubtful validity is the constant evidence that the ones doing the writing were knowledgeable about their subjects, even to the using of minute details in which, of course, writers are especially subject to error.

A. MONEY

During the years that the New Testament covers, many different forms of coinage were in use, both of Jews, Greeks and Romans. The New Testament does not record such changes, but it does have various references to money within it so as to furnish a good test of a writer's accuracy.

For instance, the shekel, the coin most commonly used by the Jews (as shown in the Old Testament) is yet not mentioned within the New. The reason was that the Jews had to use other coins then current. Yet the accounts show that other coinage equivalent to the shekel, and in reference to it, was used. The Jewish half-shekel was

the common payment of the temple tax. Every Jew was to pay such amount yearly for the upkeep of the temple. Matthew 17 shows that a Greek coin, the didrachma, was asked for in its place because it was approximately of the same value. Peter is sent by Jesus to catch a fish having a stater in its mouth. The stater was twice the value of the didrachma, and thus exactly right for payment of two men's temple tax.

Again, Mark 12 and Luke 21 tell of a poor widow who made an offering at the temple. She cast in two small coins called leptons. Mark, in explaining the matter, says that the leptons were equal to the Roman quadrans, which shows that Mark was both informed and accurate. Matthew speaks of the market value of two sparrows, which was an assarius (10:28).

Many other instances could be cited of this nature which would show that the writers were accurate down to details, for they often mentioned such things incidentally. The common day's wage was a denarius, which was also the most common silver coin used. Thus it is very often mentioned, as in Matthew 18:28; 22:19; Mark 6:37; 14:5; Luke 10:35; John 12:5.

B. CULTURE

There are many different items of interest here of which the writers assume knowledge by their readers, and which are verified by independent authors. For instance, the cultural problems between Jews and Samaritans, as seen in Luke 9:51-56; John 4:9; John 8:40. Josephus remarks that the hatred between the two cultures was such that it caused many confrontations, even to the extent of interference by the Roman authorities.

Among the Jews themselves, sects were of great importance, especially those of the Pharisees and Sadducees. These two groups appear at various times in the New Testament books (the Pharisees appearing some 95 times, and the Sadducees 20 times). In addition, other groups such as the Herodians are mentioned. In each of these cases, the characterization of them, such as the fact that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection while the Sadducees did not, are borne out by other writers. Moreover, the extensive references to the various groups among the New Testament books themselves are always in agreement.

C. GEOGRAPHY

Accuracy in this area is most difficult, especially if the writers are not knowledgeable. One of the difficulties with Josephus, a native of Palestine in his early life, is that his geographical references are not always accurate. (McGarvey mentions the fact that the first edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* had many blunders in its pages with regard to descriptions of places in America.) Of course, one of the major points of conflict has been in this area. Over the years, again and again, the geographical accuracy of the New Testament writers has been contested. But, as some of the books in the appended bibliography will show, they have been verified to the critics' chagrin. The classical story of the conversion of Sir William Ramsay because of this very fact is of abiding interest. Disclaiming the credibility of the New Testament, especially of Luke as a writer, he went to the Holy Lands to prove his point. Thorough investigation of Bible lands caused him to change his mind. He spent the rest of his life showing how accurate the New Testament writers were, and the abundant reasons to accept their writings as believable. Whether we are speaking about the relationship of cities to one another or the distance and topography between them, it is always the same: the writers are invariably accurate. More than that, they write from the perspective that their readers would know the truth whereof they spoke. For instance, John was immersing at Aenon near Salem, because there was much water there. Jesus fed the five thousand in a place where there was much grass, but also near the sea, yet a lonely place where little if any food was available. Such a place was northeast of Capernaum, near a city called Bethsaida. Jesus allowed some demons to inhabit a herd of swine, which fact caused the swine to rush down a steep hillside into the Sea of Galilee. There is only one place on the eastern shore of Galilee where this is possible. There would not be people keeping swine except in an area like the Decapolis, east of the Sea. Jesus was crucified outside the Jerusalem city wall, yet close enough for people to come and go as they view the proceedings, and close enough to be buried in a garden which contained a new tomb. People invariably went up to Jerusalem from Jericho or down from Jerusalem to Gaza or Caesarea. The accuracy of Luke's record of Paul's voyage in Acts 27 is of enduring value. The comments about places and weather conditions have been found to be as Luke represented them.

V. Alleged Internal Contradictions

When we consider the New Testament writers and the history which they record, and especially that of the Gospels, one of the facts that immediately comes to mind is that they oftentimes record the same events. Unless all of them are thoroughly informed about the events they give, contradictions will be found. Obviously, any contradiction poses some problem for the reader. If a contradiction really exists between two of the writers in question, one or both of the writers is necessarily in error. If, however, the writers prove credible, then there is all the more reason to trust them, especially in areas where we have no way of checking their record.

When we consider supposed contradictions, we should keep the following things in mind:

- a) It may be a contradiction because of the inaccuracy of the writers.
- b) We may not understand accurately, thus we suppose a contradiction when none exists.
- c) A contradiction exists, not when statements differ, but when they cannot both be true.

When an attempt is made to reconcile two statements, showing that no contradiction exists, it is not necessary to prove the truth of the hypothesis. It is only necessary to show the possibility of reconciling the statements. If it is possible to reconcile the supposed contradictory statements, then no contradiction in fact exists. Hence, we are duty bound to consider possibilities by which supposed contradictory statements may be reconciled. We may need to consider that even if we personally cannot reconcile them, some other person may be able to do so.

When we consider the writers of our four Gospels, and the product, the books themselves, it is easily noticed that, though they are the same, yet they are also not the same. Not one writer attempts to present the complete life of Jesus. Not one writer claims to tell all that happened on any given occasion. Each of the books is a selected history, in which the writer chose the events which he wished to record. They were selective with their choices.

Bearing these facts in mind, we may anticipate the subsequent discussion by saying that many have accused the Gospel writers (especially these four in contradistinction to the other New

Testament authors) of being mistaken as to the facts, thus writers having little if any credibility. We shall now present some examples of this, and give possible solutions to the purported difficulties.

A. THE SYNOPTICS AND JOHN

It has often been alleged that John's Gospel is so very different from the Synoptics that both cannot be true. Some say that the Synoptics present Jesus as beginning *his ministry* about the time John was imprisoned; whereas John's Gospel represents Jesus in an extensive public ministry while John was still preaching. In fact, none of the four writers state exactly when Jesus' ministry began. John shows an early ministry in Judea which the Synoptics do not treat, but do show that such a fact is true by the calling of the four fishermen (which presupposes earlier acquaintance with them). The Synoptics represent Jesus in an extensive Galilean ministry, though John does not; yet John's Gospel shows that the writer knows about such ministry, as in Ch. 6.

Along these same lines, the Gospels supposedly have Jesus spending nearly all of his time in Galilee, while John locates him generally in Judea. We answer:

- a) None of the Gospel claims to give a full account.
- b) If John wrote after the Synoptics, there would be no point in covering the same things again.
- c) Moreover, a great amount of material in all Gospels either indicates or shows knowledge of ministry in other areas.

As an illustration, Jesus wept over Jerusalem, remarking that he would often have gathered the people of Jerusalem under his wings, but they would not have it so. Luke's Gospel shows that Jesus spent considerable time other than in Galilee, as Chs. 10-18 show. John's Gospel shows Jesus in Galilee for a wedding feast (Ch. 2), going from Galilee to Jerusalem (Ch. 7), and in the Decapolis area (Chs. 10-11).

1. THE TEACHING OF JESUS. As recorded in the Synoptics and John, it has often been presented as so different that either one or both cannot be true. For instance, the Synoptics purportedly give Jesus' teachings in parable form and proverb form, whereas John represents Jesus in long sermons. Again, the Synoptics supposedly give the teaching of Jesus as simple and practical, whereas John presents it as

deep and profound. We answer: is it impossible that Jesus had more than one style of teaching? Is it not true that long sermons are found in the Synoptics (as in Matt. 5-7; Ch. 13; Lk. 15-16), while John has short sayings or discourses (such as 2:19; 3:5; 8:31; 9:4-5)? When we consider profound discussions, people differ as to what profound means. We will grant that John's Gospel has many profound things. Is not the same also true in Matt. 9 where Jesus forgives sins, in Matt. 11 where Jesus claims to reveal the Father, in Matt. 16 where Jesus speaks of building his Church, in Mark 10 where Jesus teaches about marriage, in Luke 24 where Jesus teaches about his relationship to the Old Testament?

2. JESUS' SELF-REVELATION. This has often been a point of dispute in that it is claimed the Synoptics present Jesus as slowly revealing himself, whereas John paints Jesus as quickly disclosing his true nature. We answer: it depends on what you consider revelation of identity. Jesus apparently worked miracles in John 2, and had many believe in him. Yet the Synoptics will show that he claims to teach with authority (as in Matt. 7) early in his public ministry. It was not necessarily apparent, even in John's account, as to what he claimed about himself, since the people were at odds among themselves about him (Cf. John 7 and John 10). There were times during his trials in Jerusalem when he did not answer questions concerning himself. In contradistinction, the discussions in public found in Matt. 21-23 show rather clearly how Jesus revealed himself.

3. MINISTRY OF JESUS. It has often been asserted that the Synoptics make the ministry of Jesus short, since they mention only one Passover, whereas John makes the ministry of Jesus at least two years long if not more. We answer: the Synoptics do not say that the only Passover Jesus observed was at his crucifixion. Mark speaks of green grass at the feeding of the five thousand (and John says it was Passover time, Ch. 6). Again, none of them affirm that they tell all of Jesus' life.

4. THE TIME OF THE CRUCIFIXION. This has often been asserted as a point of contradiction between the Synoptics and John. John has Jesus being in the presence of Pilate at the sixth hour (19:14) whereas the Synoptics have Jesus on the cross about the third hour (Mark 15:25). We answer: that the use of different methods of counting time solves the difficulty. The Jews used one system of counting time and the Romans used another. If, as generally held, the Synoptics wrote

much earlier than John, they may well have used a different system of counting time than John did writing much later. Moreover, if John's sixth hour is 6 o'clock in the morning Roman time, whereas Mark's third hour is 9 o'clock in the morning Jewish time, the discrepancy vanishes.

5. THE RESURRECTION ACCOUNTS. These have often provided points of dispute and charges of discrepancies. Hence, it will be profitable to consider some of those as we examine the case for credibility (it will be wise to remind the reader that we have yet to deal with inspiration and the effect it might have upon these accounts). However, in relationship to the resurrection accounts, to say there are no problems in harmonization would be false. It would be just as false to say it is impossible to harmonize them. We may not perfectly understand the statements made or be able to harmonize all the statements to our satisfaction. The task is there for us, however. The following charges among others have been made concerning the accounts in question.

a) *The PROBLEM of time* presents itself.

Matthew suggests that the women came to the tomb "toward the dawn of the first day."

Mark says "very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen."

Luke says "on the first day at early dawn."

John records that it was "on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came . . . early, while it was still dark" and implies that others were with her.

One problem that seems to exist is the time of coming or going. One solution to the problem is the understanding of the Greek verb which may either be translated "come" or "go". Another solution to the problem is to decide from what perspective the writer views the going, whether at the time they left or in reference to their arrival. A third suggestion is to decide how closely the writer is attempting to place the visit, and in reference to what other event or time.

b) *The NUMBER of people* who visited the tomb has been questioned.

Matthew suggests Mary Magdalene and the other Mary.

Mark suggests Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome.

Luke stipulates Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women.

John speaks only of Mary Magdalene but implies others with her in verse 2.

None of the accounts state they are relating all the people who came. Luke's account specifically says other women than the ones he lists, which fact shows all the accounts could be true.

c) *The REASON for the visit* to the tomb by the women has also been attacked.

Matthew says they went to see the tomb.

Mark records that they went to anoint him.

Luke says they went to the tomb taking prepared spices.

John's account does not state the reason for going.

The difficulty which some see is not immediately apparent, since none of the accounts state the women had a certain purpose to the exclusion of others. Furthermore, there may have been more than one visit to the tomb. It is entirely possible that Matthew 28:1 and Mark 16:1 are relating a visit on Saturday evening (or activity in prospect of a visit), rather than a Sunday morning visit. Mark 16:2 then presupposes the previous verse. Matthew's account may, however, just have in mind the Sunday morning visit.

d) *The PERSONAGES encountered* at the tomb have been made a matter of accusation.

Matthew's account records an angel outside the tomb.

Mark's account records a white-robed young man sitting inside the tomb.

Luke's account reveals two men in dazzling apparel who suddenly materialized to the women in the tomb.

John's account presents two angels in white sitting where Jesus had lain.

We remind the reader that a) no account denies that which the other account affirms and b) we do not have to prove the hypothesis that will apparently reconcile the accounts, but only present the possibility of harmonization. The angel in Matthew's account is not said to be the only angel. He may have been the only angel outside the tomb. Mark's account speaks of a white robed young man who amazed the women but does not deny that he was an angel or that there could have been two men in dazzling apparel in the tomb.

Mark's account may have been concerned with only the one who spoke to the ladies. John's account concerns a later visit to the tomb by Mary Magdalene which is not to be considered with the other three accounts.

e) *The MESSAGE* given to the women is said to be evidence of mistakes in the accounts.

Matthew's account has the angel offering an invitation to see the place where Jesus lay, and a command to go with a message to Jesus' disciples about his resurrection and a proposed visit to Galilee.

Mark's account has additions to the statements in Matthew (which fact is not unusual in parallel accounts), but does not materially differ from Matthew.

Luke does not record all that Matthew and Mark do, but rather adds that Jesus had foretold his crucifixion and resurrection, while not mentioning either the invitation to see the tomb or the command to go with the message.

John's account concerns the visit of Mary Magdalene and does not treat the other women's visit. None of the accounts deny that other things could have been said other than what they record. They can be harmonized with no account denying what the other affirms.

f) *The REACTIONS* of the women are next in order.

Matthew's account has the ladies leaving the tomb with fear and great joy, going to tell Jesus' disciples what they had seen.

Mark's account has the women fleeing the tomb in astonishment and fear, saying nothing to anyone.

Luke, as with Matthew, has the ladies speaking to the eleven and others. There is no problem if we consider that the ladies did exactly as they were told to do (which they did do!): tell the disciples of Jesus what they had seen, and that they were to go to Galilee. They said nothing to anyone other than those to whom they were commanded to speak.

g) *The ENCOUNTER* with Jesus has also been a made a point of dispute.

Matthew's account has the women falling at Jesus' feet, touching and worshipping him.

John's account purportedly has Jesus refusing to allow Mary Magdalene to touch him. This apparent discrepancy is easily handled by a better and more accurate translation of the verb in John

20:17. Jesus really told her to "quit holding me," rather than (K.J.V.) "touch me not."

These are typical of the accusations brought against the credibility of the Gospel writers. They are for many people problems that do need consideration and resolution. They do need to be examined from the perspective of an accurate and trustworthy account. We do not want to deny that problems exist, or that one's reason should be excluded from consideration. We must not ignore what may be true for the sake of alleviating any room for doubt.

On the other hand, if one approaches these records holding the attitude that they are trustworthy unless and until proved otherwise, then the procedure may well be different as well as the outcome. It is only the mark of good scholarship to withhold judgment until all the evidence is in, and the probabilities accounted for. One should not treat the accounts of Jesus like Jesus was treated at his trials: as one obviously guilty of wrong-doing; but rather, as Nicodemus would say, "do we judge . . . before we hear . . .?"

B. HISTORICAL AGREEMENTS IN THE GOSPELS

Testimony which should also be considered is that within the New Testament books themselves. Since each of them is an account within itself (disregarding the position held by some that Mark and John are the only two independent authors. For additional discussion, see the end of this chapter and the attached bibliography), we may consider each in respect to the statements made which are of an historical nature.

As a reminder, incidental agreements are important as they indicate an accuracy for details that is a mark of credibility. The accounts in question contain many such, as well as agreements of more length. We present the following examples for consideration.

1. JESUS' IMMERSION AND JOHN'S WITNESS. John's Gospel has this from the Immerser's lips: "I beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and it abode upon Jesus." He then stated that such a sign caused him to believe that Jesus was God's son. However, John's account gives no reason why John should have drawn such conclusion. The Synoptics show that at Jesus' immersion God made the statement concerning Jesus: "This is my beloved son . . ." Hence, John's information is accounted for. (See Mt. 3, Mk. 1, Lk. 3, Jn. 1)

2. THE CALL OF THE FOUR FISHERMEN. The Synoptics depict Jesus as passing by the seashore, summoning the brothers Peter, Andrew, James and John, from their nets, which they immediately left to follow him. However, the Synoptics do not give any indication that the men had ever seen Jesus, or in any way known him. John's account shows that the men had followed Jesus for over a year, and therefore knew him before their "call" (See Mt. 4, Mk. 1, Lk. 5, Jn. 1).

3. THE HEALING AT PETER'S HOUSE. Mark (and Matthew, Ch. 8) has Jesus leaving a synagogue, going to Peter's house, where he healed Peter's mother-in-law. As soon as this fact, plus that of the previous miracle in the synagogue, was raised about, many came, though not until evening, and brought their sick for Jesus to heal. We would not know but for Luke's account that the day was the Sabbath, or for John's account that no burdens were to be borne on that day. Hence, the people had to wait until sundown, when the Sabbath would be over, to carry their sick to Jesus. It is doubtful if any of the writers intentionally added details to explain the other accounts. (See Mk. 1, Lk. 4, Jn. 5)

4. HEROD AND JOHN. Matthew records for us that when Herod heard of Jesus' miracles, he remarked to his servants that he thought it was John, whom he had beheaded. However, we know not how Matthew found out what Herod said. Luke, though, informs us that some of Herod's servants were also servants of Jesus, thus (probably) supplying such information. (See Mt. 14, Lk. 8; Acts 13.)

5. THE ATTEMPT TO ENTHRONE JESUS. Matthew records the death of John, which fact, when Jesus heard it, caused Christ to withdraw into a lonely place. Mark rather than mentioning John's death as the reason for withdrawal, cites the pressure of the crowds to such an extent that the disciples could not eat. Later, John will write that the crowds wanted to make Jesus king, though his account does not mention what the others record. Each adds a piece to the total picture: the crowd's pressure was because their leader (John) was now dead, and Jesus was the logical successor. Even Jesus' attempt to draw away was thwarted. In addition the accounts combined give this final glimpse: Jesus dismissed the crowds one way, sent the disciples off another way, and went apart by himself — all to avoid the attempt to crown him as king. We may notice in passing that Matthew has the multitude sitting on grass, while Mark adds "green".

John alone gives us the fact that it was Passover time, which would help us know that the accounts are credible, since early rains around Passover would cause green grass. Another item is that Matthew states that about 5,000 men plus were fed, but doesn't show how that was known. Mark has the detail that crowds were seated in groups of fifty to one hundred. (see Mt. 14, Mk. 6, Lk. 9, Jn. 6.)

6. JESUS' TRIUMPHAL ENTRY. When Jesus came to Jerusalem to begin the last week of events, John's historical note is: "Six days before the Passover" as the time. None of the Synoptics has this fact, but Mark incidentally mentions the following points: (the next day, John 12:12) Jesus goes to Jerusalem and then home, cursed the fig tree on the next day, and found the tree withered the day after, making a total of three days. Then we read in Mark that it was yet two days to Passover, which fact tallies exactly with John's original statement. (See Mk. 11, 14, Jn. 12.)

7. THE EAR OF MALCHUS. When Jesus was arrested, one incident was that which involved Peter attempting to defend Jesus, cutting off the ear of the high-priest's servant, Malchus. Yet we hear nothing about the fact when we are in the courtyard, no condemnation of Peter, etc. Luke alone supplies the reason: Jesus had replaced the ear for Malchus. (See Mt. 26, Mk. 14, Lk. 22, Jn. 18.)

8. THE TRIALS OF JESUS. During the trial before Caiaphas, Mark records that the soldiers struck Jesus, and asked him to prophesy, telling them who hit him. This would seem a bit absurd, since Mark does not inform us of any reason why Jesus couldn't see who hit him. Luke adds a minor detail: Jesus was blindfolded. (See Mk. 14, Lk. 22.)

C. HISTORICAL AGREEMENTS BETWEEN ACTS AND/OR THE EPISTLES.

Unbelievers have often asserted that there are contradictions between the various epistles, or between them and Acts. Hence, we can with good reason search such books to see if they do not, in fact, bear mutual witness to the veracity of each other. There are many which could be presented, but these next are typical of all.

1. THE YOUNG MAN SAUL. Acts 8 introduces Saul as a young man, active in persecution of the church. Galatians 1:13-14 tells us that Saul was one who advanced in the Jewish religion beyond many of

his own age, because he was exceedingly zealous for the traditions of his fathers.

2. PAUL'S PREACHING. Acts 9 recounts the fact of Saul's conversion, and immediate proclamation of Jesus, to the amazement of his hearers. Galatians 1:15-16 reveals that same fact, when Paul states that he "immediately" preached Jesus, not consulting with any others. Furthermore, he continued to do so, over a period of several years, before he actually spoke with any apostle.

3. PAUL'S ESCAPE. Luke continues the Acts account, relating that Saul had to flee the city for his life because of the Jews, escaping in a basket through the city wall. II Corinthians 11:32-33 informs us that the governor of the city was also after Saul, and that a window in the wall provided the means of exit.

4. THE STONING OF PAUL. The first missionary journey brought Saul, now Paul, to Lystra, where he was stoned. He himself writes in II Cor. 11:25 that he once was stoned.

5. THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL. Several points of interest are here. First, the accounts differ as to the people who went, yet are in harmony. Galatians 2 supplies what Acts leaves out, namely Titus who went with Paul and Barnabas. Second, Acts shows that the reason for going was about circumcision of Gentiles. Though Galatians does not expressly mention such fact, the struggle over the circumcision of Titus declares the issue, though not plainly evident just from Galatians. Third, Luke reports that the agreement was reached in a public meeting, Peter, James, Barnabas, and Paul being present; whereas Galatians relates the fact of an earlier discussion and agreement, which took place (apparently) before the public assembly. Fourth, those who caused the furor are described in Acts as some of the Pharisee's sect who believed, while Paul delineates them as false brethren who had been brought in privately.

6. THE PHILIPPIANS' SUFFERING. Acts 16 recounts Paul and Silas in jail in Philippi, having been beaten. The apostle, years after the incident, mentions it in Philippians 1:29-30 by saying that they, like him when in their midst, were being afflicted.

7. PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS. Luke's history has Paul going to Ephesus from Galatia and Phrygia (Acts 18:23-19:1). From Ephesus he writes the first epistle (16:8-9), in which he mentions a collection

(16:1-2) they were to take up, remarking that he had also instructed the Galatian churches likewise.

8. PAUL AND THE ROMANS. Good doctor Luke relates that Paul, with others, did go to Jerusalem, Chs. 20-21, though not mentioning the purpose of such trip. The apostle mentions in Romans 15:25-26 that, though he wanted to go to Spain through Rome, he was then taking an offering from the region of Macedonia to Judea. The same collection is mentioned in II Corinthians 8-9. Luke later relates Paul's statement to Felix, Ch. 24:17, that he had come to Jerusalem with an offering for his people. Romans 15:30 contains Paul's request for their prayers in his behalf, because of the apparent foreboding he had about his Jewish enemies. Acts 20:22-23 has Paul saying the same general ideas to the elders at Ephesus, while Acts 21:11 shows Agabus prophesying the actual fact. The subsequent history of Luke shows that Paul did have trouble; that prayers, if uttered, were not answered as asked, but deliverance did come. Additionally, he arrived in Rome as he had long desired, Romans 1:13, 15:28, though in chains.

Summary

The lists above could be extended greatly, but enough has been written to display the fact that our histories are truthful down to small details (and likewise argues for the authorship of some epistles). As has been shown over and over, the New Testament authors were good historians, whatever else they might also have been. There is no good reason to reject their credibility — only presuppositions cause such rejection.

From these three chapters, the following conclusions are drawn: 1) the basic text is sound, and provides a proper basis for discussion of its total contents; 2) the authors of the various books of the New Testament are those traditionally held, beyond reasonable doubt; and 3) have been shown to be credible in regard to their historical statements, insofar as we can check them. Hence, we deduce that the books which we possess provide an adequate basis for meaningful consideration of them just as they stand.

What we have tried to do in the preceding chapter (and chapters) is to show that the writers of our New Testament wrote (believable) historical accounts because the history they recorded is important for faith. There are those in our time who act as if historical events are of

such nature that either a) we can know so little about them that they are practically useless, or b) it is superfluous to consider them since they are irrelevant to us, having nothing meaningful to add. We can know and use history profitably, both in the secular and religious realms. God is a God of history. He acted (and acts) in time and space because we are creatures of time and space. Meaning is, for the Christian, inextricably linked to history. Faith is based on facts, which concern events, such as those of which we read in the Bible. We have no good reason to refuse the factual historical accounts (in which we can find adequate reasons for our faith) and do like many who, because of their dislike for history or their presuppositions, reject such accounts as are in the New Testament; and instead place their faith in the faith of the early church. Such is quite unnecessary, as well as highly suspect.

Hence, we believe it is important to have considered whether or not we have credible writings, and, further, what they said about Jesus. A quote from Sherwin-White in his *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* will be instructive about the Gospels (especially) and what they offer concerning Jesus of Nazareth, in contradistinction to other historical accounts about people in world history.

"So, it is astonishing that while Graeco-Roman historians have been growing in confidence, the twentieth-century study of the Gospel narratives, starting from no less promising material, has taken so gloomy a turn in the development of form-criticism that the more advanced exponents of it apparently maintain — so far as an amateur can understand the matter — that the historical Christ is unknowable and the history of his mission cannot be written. This seems very curious when one compares the case for the best-known contemporary of Christ, who like Christ is a well documented figure — Tiberius Caesar. The story of his reign is known from four sources, the *Annals* of Tacitus and the biography of Suetonius, written some eighty or ninety years later, the brief contemporary record of Belleius Paterculus, and the third-century history of Cassius Dio. These disagree amongst themselves in the wildest possible fashion, both in major matters of political action or motive and in specific details of minor events. Everyone would admit that Tacitus is the best of all the sources, and yet no serious modern historian would accept at face value the majority of the statements of Tacitus about the motives of Tiberius." (Courtesy of Oxford University Press, Fair Lawn, New Jersey.)

Our accounts are thoroughly factual, in marked agreement. We conclude they relate material which can be a basis for faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of the Living God.

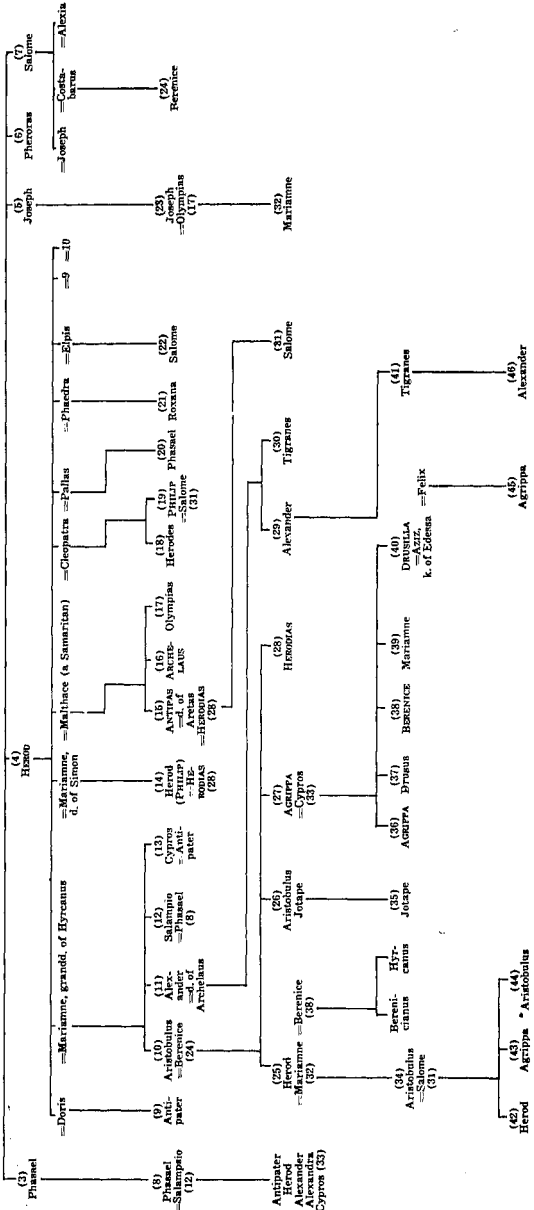
From this perspective, then, we will next consider what was written about the inspiration of these accounts, and what that fact means to the accounts, and subsequently to our faith.

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THE HERODIAN FAMILY.

- (1) Antipater, Governor of Idumea (Jos. Ant. xvi. 1, 2).
- (2) Antipater=Cyrene (an Arabian: Jos. Ant. xiv. 7, 3).



Ct. Joseph. Ant. xviii. 6, 4. (4) Herod the King, Matt. ii. 1ff.; Luke 1:5.
 Ant. xvii. 1, 3. (15) Herod the Tetrarch, Matt. xiv. 1; King Herod, Mark vi. 14.
 Wars. 1. 28, 4. (36) King Agrippa, Acts xxv. 13.

The family relations of the Herods are singularly complicated from the frequent recurrence of the same names, and the several accounts of Josephus are not consistent in every detail. The numbers of the Herodian family who are mentioned in the N. T. are distinguished by capitals. A double line indicates a marriage.