

# Introduction

## Can we hear echoes of Jesus' words when we read the New Testament?



Many questions arise when looking at the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as found in the New Testament. The importance of these questions is evident by the fact that there are few issues more emotive than whether this part of the Bible contains a real and accurate description of Jesus. This is partly because of two reasons. Firstly, individual people and governments around the world use, or have used, the Bible as their foundation for deciding what is right and what is wrong. Secondly, hundreds of millions of men, women and children understand the Bible as being God's ultimate revelation of himself to us, describing how God became human flesh and dwelt among people in the person of Jesus Christ. It is this same Jesus that they believe offers them forgiveness and a relationship whereby he indwells them and becomes their friend and master.

### **How scholars view the reliability of the New Testament**

Despite the importance of these Biblical passages about Jesus to so many people, I have met many who believe that no intelligent person would spend time considering the life and teachings of Jesus. Often this is because they are convinced that the biblical records about Jesus merely represent a collection of folk tales. To them the New Testament accounts about Jesus represent fanciful stories that have been so entwined with reality that it is impossible to discern anything

but a small remnant of historical truth about what Jesus actually said and did.

On the other hand, I have found that there have been extraordinarily brilliant individuals who have discovered that Jesus' life was at least very fascinating, even though they appear to have never given their allegiance to him. One of the most famous scientists of the 20th century was greatly impressed by the figure of Jesus Christ. Although he did not profess to be a Christian, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Albert Einstein made the following comments in an interview in 1929:

*As a child I received instruction in the Bible and the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene [Jesus] ... Jesus is too colossal for the pen of phrasemongers, however artful ...<sup>1</sup>*

When asked if he accepted the historical existence of Jesus, he replied:

*Unquestionably. No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life ... legendary heroes of antiquity ... lack the authentic vitality of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>*

When such a great genius of physics as Einstein speaks so favourably about the accounts of Jesus found in the Gospels of the New Testament, it should at least encourage us to read them and decide for ourselves just how colossal is Jesus. Einstein did, like all of us, have a bias about the existence of God, and so his belief in a 'spirit vastly superior to man'<sup>3</sup> may have predisposed him to arrive at his conclusions about Jesus. However, it should be kept in mind that Einstein began life

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1 GS Viereck, 'What life means to Einstein: an interview by George Sylvester Viereck', *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 October 1929, pp. 17, 110, 113, 114 & 117.

2 GS Viereck, , pp. 17, 110, 113, 114 & 117.

3 H Dukas & B Hoffman (eds), *Albert Einstein the Human Side*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981. At least at one point in his life, Einstein did not believe in a personal God. Based on *New York Times* magazine article from 1930, according to the same book. At the present time, a variety of scientists are publishing popular books on theological issues, often denouncing the existence of God.

as a practising Jew (a religion that does not regard Jesus as God the Son) nor did he believe in a personal God. The thought did also occur to me that Einstein's judgment about Jesus may be regarded as inconsequential insofar as inspiring us to read the New Testament given he was a specialist in physics and not in history or theology. The flipside of this concern is that if an intelligent person who is not a specialist in history, nor a Christian, could conclude that the Gospels present a reliable account about Jesus, then maybe one does not need to be a rocket scientist to reach a similar conclusion.

Of course it is not only brilliant scientists who consider that the Gospels contain valuable information about Jesus. There are scholars of history and ancient literature who have also concluded that the Bible provides a reliable account about Jesus. I have selected quotations from two such scholars; the first is from another secular scholar and the second from a Christian.

Will Durant, a philosopher and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer of history, wrote:

*Despite the prejudices and theological preconceptions of the evangelists [who wrote the Gospels], they record many incidents that many inventors would have concealed. No one reading these scenes can doubt the reality of the figure [Jesus] behind them. That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels. After two centuries of Higher Criticism [attacking the authenticity and veracity of the Bible] the outlines of the life, character, and teaching of Christ, remain reasonably clear, and constitute the most fascinating feature in the history of Western man.<sup>4</sup>*

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4 W Durant, 'Caesar and Christ: a history of the Roman civilization and of Christianity from beginnings to A.D. 325', in *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 3 " Simon and Schuster, New York, 1944, p. 557. It should be kept in mind that Durant referred to himself as an agnostic and was critical of belief in a supernatural God. He also believed that the gospels were not a perfect record of Jesus' life. For example he stated that 'there are many contradictions between one gospel and another... [However the] contradictions are of minutiae, not substance; in essentials the synoptic gospels agree remarkably well.' p. 557

Professor Edwin Yamauchi, who has received masters and doctoral degrees in Mediterranean studies, stated in an interview that:

*... my studies have greatly strengthened and enriched my spiritual life ... This doesn't mean that I don't recognize that there are some issues that still remain; within this lifetime we will not have full knowledge. But these issues don't even begin to undermine my faith in the essential trustworthiness of the New Testament ... For me, the historical evidence has reinforced my commitment to Jesus Christ as the Son of God who loves us and died for us and was raised from the dead.<sup>5</sup>*

## **But what does the evidence say?**

However, the decision of whether or not to investigate the life of Jesus should not be based solely on the testimonies of several scholars. One reason for this is that it is easy to find scholars who have quite different opinions about the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament accounts. For example, one scholar wrote that even Jesus' birth town (Bethlehem) had been deliberately reassigned from the real place of birth, so as to make Jesus appear very significant in the eyes of the Jews.<sup>6</sup>

Because of this divergence of scholarly opinion, I wanted to embark on a study of the actual evidence for the reliability of the New Testament. This is based on the concept that it is not so much opinions that matter, but the foundations for these opinions. The evidence that I was particularly interested in related to three broad questions that are commonly asked:

1. The New Testament was written hundreds of years ago, so it had to be copied by hand, over and over again, until the printing press was invented in the 1400s. Has all this repeated copying caused many changes in the message of the New Testament and, if so, how much has it changed? If there were changes, were they all accidentally made by copyists or were some intentional?

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5 L. Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*, Zondervan, Michigan, US, 1988, p.119. Prof. Yamauchi has published 80 articles in 37 scholarly journals.

6 BD Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*, HarperCollins e-books, 2009, pp. 235–6. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/22916607/Jesus-interrupted-Bart-D-ehрман>, accessed 11/08/2013.

2. Were the people who wrote the New Testament reliable and honest? Because these authors were biased towards Jesus, has their bias twisted the original story?
3. Given that Jesus did not write down his teachings into a book, how is it possible that Jesus' spoken words were recorded accurately by his disciples? Was not reading and writing 2000 years ago the preserve of only an elite few?

## **Parts of this book**

My investigative journey took a path involving several successive stages, which are discussed in parts I to IV. The book then finishes with a look at the implications of the discoveries made along the way, followed by three appendices. The following is a brief outline of the book.

### **Part I: Literacy and gullibility in the world of Jesus**

This part consists of four chapters that explore several related beliefs that I have encountered frequently. The first is that people who lived around the time of Jesus were unable to write accurate history and that as a consequence the small amount of literature that was produced is probably very inaccurate. The second belief is that literacy was rare among the people. This illiteracy created an environment conducive to people being easily duped, which in turn aided the spread of Christianity.

In chapter 1, I will demonstrate that there existed people, during and before the time of Jesus, who were able to write reliable historical records. Chapter 2 will look at how widespread literacy was in the Greco-Roman Empire. This geographical consideration is important as it was from the province of Judea that Christianity grew. Chapter 3 will seek to uncover evidence for literacy amongst the Judean inhabitants specifically, as these are the people with which Jesus shared his life the most. It will also examine the literacy of the early Christian community. Finally, chapter 4 will examine the relationship between illiteracy and gullibility.

### **Part II: From Jesus' mouth to the disciples' hands**

This explores in two chapters whether it was possible for Jesus' actions and teachings to be recorded accurately by the early disciples. It analyses the idea that the disciples casually followed Jesus around the

countryside and tried to recall what he said and what he did only after he had died. With these half-hearted remembrances, they then began to travel the highways and byways spreading their stories.

In chapter 5 I will examine the likelihood that Jesus was a teacher who was diligent in teaching his disciples, and that they in turn were equally dedicated to preserving what he said and did.

Chapter 6 will illustrate how Jesus taught using various techniques that would have greatly aided the accurate retention of all that he said. It will also look at why it is that sometimes the same account, when described in more than one Gospel, has variations.

### **Part III: Accuracy in the copying of the New Testament accounts**

Unfortunately, the original handwritten books and letters of the New Testament no longer exist. However, copies of these documents were made before they disintegrated, and as the centuries passed, copies of these copies were also made. This process of making copies of copies has resulted in changes to the original wording. The extent and impact of these changes are explored in this part. Chapter 7 examines the oldest complete, and incomplete, copies of the New Testament. Chapter 8 looks closely at the accuracy of copying by comparing several ancient important copies made in the 200s and 300s AD, while chapter 9 explores ways of comparing many ancient copies. The impact of three portions of the New Testament that have been copied differently in the early centuries AD is studied in chapter 10. Chapter 11 responds to the question of how different the Christian message would be if our New Testament was solely based on one particular ancient copy that is considered by many scholars to be very different and inferior in terms of accuracy to other highly regarded copies.

### **Part IV: Evidence from early Christian and non-Christian witnesses**

Because the oldest significant portions of the New Testament are dated later than 200 AD, it is important to establish whether the New Testament was copied accurately before this time. One way to explore this matter is to compare the teachings of Christian leaders who wrote before 200 AD with the teachings of the New Testament. Another way

is to delve into the writings of non-Christians who also wrote before 200 AD and commented on Christian beliefs. The comments of these non-Christians can also be used to determine if the bias of the authors of the New Testament had a negative impact on their truthfulness. Who these non-Christian authors were, why they commented on Jesus and the Christians, and what they had to say is one of the main focuses of this part.

Chapter 12 compares Christian teachings found in a letter composed by the Christian leader Polycarp with statements found in the New Testament. It also considers the work of two non-Christian historians — Tacitus and Thallus. The credibility and writings of three more authors from the ancient world — Lucian, Pliny and Josephus — are examined over chapters 13 to 17.

## **Implications and the appendices**

The final chapter outlines the implications of the New Testament being reliable for those who have non-Christian beliefs, including agnostics and Muslims.

I have also composed three appendices, the first of which provides a brief background of political and religious life in first-century Judea. The second appendix consists of a table showing points of agreement between the New Testament and the non-Christian writers mentioned in part IV. Appendix 3 considers claims that the town named in the New Testament as being Jesus' home town did not exist during his lifetime.

I hope that those who finish reading this book will see that it is reasonable to conclude, based on an understanding of historical evidence, that the New Testament accounts of Jesus and the first Christians are trustworthy and vitally important.

