THE HISTORIAN AND THE GOSPELS*

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two hundred years the Leben Jesu-Forschung has produced whole libraries on the credibility of the four evangelists, with theological and historical opinion ranging from trust in the literal reliability of the gospels to the denial that Jesus ever lived. The following observations concentrate on one aspect which supports the general credibility of the gospels: in their historical milieu, the Roman empire, there were excellent means of communication, so that anyone wishing to convert to the new faith could easily obtain information about Jesus' life and work in Israel before taking this serious step. The evangelists too knew this, and accordingly kept to the historical truth as far as this was possible in a world of oral history.

The author has not yet found such considerations in modern literature, although he may not be the first to have raised them: but who indeed is in a position to survey the vast terrain of research on the gospels?

I

Inasmuch as many writers have undertaken to set out in order an account of the events that have been accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good also to me, as one who from the first had followed everything closely, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of the words about which you have been informed.

Luke 1.1-4

With this impressive period Luke proclaims to his addressee Theophilus his intention of treating anew the events which many others have related before him, and which he himself has meanwhile subjected to thorough investigation. Does he speak here as theologian or as historian? Is this work a gospel or a piece of historiography? Or is Luke both historian and evangelist (although the latter word is not used by him)?

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These have long been contentious issues. But when in the opening causal clause already we read prosomata = 'events', the standard ancient term for history, and then encounter in the course of the proemium a cluster of motifs which have a distinguished ancestry in the prefaces of the Greek and Latin historians, we would hardly be doing Luke an injustice in treating him as historian, and in assuming that he regarded himself as such (or perhaps also as historian).

Some 500 years earlier the father of history, as Herodotus was called by Cicero, had also, like Luke, used the preface to announce not only the theme of his histories, but also to emphasize his investigative research (historid); and in a concluding purpose clause he explained his intention in publishing the work. Luke's conspicuous reference to earlier authors who had treated the same topic also recalls the group of Greek athtidiographers and Roman annalists who concurrently or in succession had devoted themselves to writing local histories. The Roman historian Livy, likewise alluding to his predecessors in the opening sentence of his preface, cites two reasons for the continuous process of historians rewriting the transmitted accounts: the more recent scriptores were writing either because they hoped to offer a more reliable treatment of their material—like Luke their own researches had brought them to a new historical understanding—or they wanted to transpose the archaic style of the earlier writers into the language of their own time. Luke, too, in the synoptic sections writes in a style which differs from that of Mark and Matthew.

Beside these and other technical implications, the linguistic form of Luke's proemium, which has been called the most elaborately stylized period in the New Testament, represents a conscious bow to the historiographical tradition. Careful choice of words brings out this affiliation: epeicper ('inasmuch as'), anataxasthai ('to set out in order') and steigas ('account'), the first, fourth and fifth words in the introductory sentence, are indeed regular in classical and Hellenistic Greek, but do not appear again in the New Testament. And the third word epecheirban ('have undertaken') is used on only two further occasions in Acts, Luke's second work.

Contemporary history, then, is the evangelist's theme, a point explicitly made in the phrase 'the events among us' which have been transmitted 'to us'. The status of these events is determined by his remark that they have been 'accomplished among us'—yet another link to Greco-Roman historiography. Since its inception, ancient historical writing had dealt exclusively with subjects of major significance. Herodotus' goal is to preserve from oblivio the mighty and wonderful achievements of Greeks and foreigners. Thucydides in his history of the Peloponnesian War described the greatest convulsion experienced by the Greek world up to his time. Polybius took as his subject the unique process by which the Roman world-empire was
established in the space of 53 years, from 220 to 167 B.C. And in a period of
decay Sallust at least chose the most spectacular crime of his century, the
crime of Catiline. All were writers of contemporary history who put
the political events in the forefront of their narratives. Everyday, cultural,
religious, social and economic history were not separate issues for them: if
it was necessary to comment on these matters or on the general course of
history, this was done in relation to the political events, or more precisely
in relation to the political protagonists. To sketch the character of these
protagonists, with their positive and negative attributes, the historians
did not generally analyse their origin and nature, but rather filled out
the portrait by describing their words and actions (pragmata). These
pragmata were performed in public, were transmitted by those who had
seen or heard of them, and could therefore be recorded by historians who
had not experienced them at first hand.

The evangelists, too, say nothing of the daily routine of Jesus' life. They
do not offer an independent characterization of his person, nor a theoretical
exposition of his teachings, but instead present both through his words and
acts: it is the great sayings and deeds of Jesus that have been witnessed
by eye and ear and thus deserve to be documented. Correspondingly Luke,
opening the Acts of the Apostles with a backward reference to the own
ealier gospel, summarizes the contents of the latter work as follows: 'In
the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to
do and teach'.

One of the tasks of the diligent historian, according
to Polybius, was to establish precisely the origin or arché of an historical
event—a difficulty compounded by the absence of an accepted universal
calendar. Thucydides accordingly determined the beginning of the Peloponnesian War by enumerating a series of eponymous officials from various
cities (2.2.1). Luke in his proemium prides himself in having researched
everything from its inception, and solemnly establishes the commencement
of Jesus' public ministry by a parallel dating which follows the Thucydidean
model (3.1-2).

Bishop Papias of Hierapolis in about 130 A.D. saw Mark as an historian
of the Lord's words and deeds, and Mark, he continued, did not have
first-hand experience of Jesus, but owed his knowledge of these words and
deeds to Peter, to whom he served as interpreter. Although doubt has been
expressed about the connection with Peter, the statement by Papias, pre-
served in the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius (3.39.15), illustrates exactly
what Luke says about the informants consulted by the 'many writers' who
before his own time had recorded the deeds of Jesus. Ancient historians
wanting to write on their own time or the preceding one or two generations
routinely acquired their information by interrogating eyewitnesses or those
with hearsay knowledge; unlike their modern counterparts, they conducted
their research not in libraries or archives, but consulted parties who had
been directly involved, a point in which they come closer to the modern journalist. This is the activity which Herodotus terms *istoria*. Nor would any other procedure have been possible in the case of Jesus who wandered through Galilee and Judaea without leaving any documentary evidence which might have been subsequently evaluated. Who then would have been in a better position to supply information about him than his own disciples, who had accompanied and observed him 'from the beginning' i.e. from his first public appearances? And as 'servants of the word' after his death who proclaimed his ministry they are especially useful as a source for the history of Jesus. One would just have to join one of their number and listen—as Papias reports about Mark.

In antiquity neither the 'minister of the word' nor the historian was required to have a photographic memory capable of reproducing verbatim accounts of what was said: claims to authenticity were not thought to have been jeopardized if the historian reported in his own words the factual kernel of what was said, or even took it upon himself to compose a speech consistent with the character of the protagonist or the circumstances of his actions. Thucydides in his chapter on method (1.22) had described this procedure, and invested it with his authority. It follows that an ancient reader would not object if the authors of the synoptic gospels, and John in particular, had Jesus speak rather differently.

Fully conversant with historiographical theory and practice, Luke set to work, following everything 'from the beginning'. If in spite of this he derived a good part of his material from the gospel of Mark, this was because his investigations suggested to him that Mark was the most reliable among the 'many' who had already written about Jesus. Athiologists and annalists followed the same procedure. It is no longer possible to determine exactly the extent to which Luke’s original contribution, about one third of the gospel, was shaped by pre-existing oral or written material. Whether he was himself able to interview eyewitnesses depends on where and when he wrote: here there are many conjectures but no clear answer. At any rate this strand of the tradition too was meticulously (ακριβῶς) examined by Luke. Thucydides, the model for all writers of contemporary history, had twice stressed his *akribeia* in the chapter on method. Luke is fully aware of the relationship between history and historiography. The words and deeds of Jesus represent something unique, now irrevocably past: here there is no distinction between secular and sacred history. At a second level there is the knowledge of those present. The historian himself operates at a third level, for by documenting his research he gives a permanent form to what the eyewitnesses had seen. Critical evaluation is necessary, for Luke concurs with Thucydides that there is 'a lack of agreement between accounts of the same occurrences by different eyewitnesses, arising sometimes from imperfect memory, sometimes from
undue partiality for one side or the other’ (1.22.3). The more meticulous the historian’s research, assessment and writing, the greater the certainty he offers his reader. Certainty, asphaleia, is what Luke promises his addressee Theophilus before he relates the story of Jesus.

Asphaleia is the last word in the proemium, its central concept and the focal point of the intricately constructed period. Its significance could not have been better emphasized by Luke, especially since this is another haplogomenon in the gospels; the substantive appears again, with concrete meaning, once each in Acts (5.23) and in the first letter to the Thessalonians (5.3). A pagan historian would have proclaimed truth, aletheia, rather than certainty, and from the evangelist one might also have expected faith, pistis, as the object of his efforts. Certainty stands between truth and credence, and hints at the position in which Theophilus found himself and into which Luke had some insight as he wrote his first book. The addressee had been familiarized (kata
cchetthis) with the story of Jesus, with the pragmata; the passive verb means no more than this (the technical term katech
tesis is not yet relevant here). But Theophilus had not yet been converted. Before that decisive step he required ‘certainty’ about what he had heard, or perhaps also read in one of the accounts by the ‘many writers’ and in a form that did not convince him. Such was the demand confronting Luke—or perhaps only the challenge that he freely accepted.

Thucydides and Polybius wanted to enable their readers to analyze politics and to predict political developments. Roman historians regarded themselves as educators who offered their fellow citizens examples from the past, both positive and negative, to emulate or to serve as deterrents. Luke was a missionary. He recognized the decisive conditions necessary for converting to Jesus a critical spirit like Theophilus: there had to be certainty against any obvious doubts that the man of Nazareth had really performed the superhuman feats which were reported of him. The missionary, that is, had to be at the same time a credible historian. And Luke was vindicated by his success: his gospel provided Theophilus with the desired certainty, and he converted to Christianity. Otherwise indeed Luke would not also have dedicated to him his second work, the Acts of the Apostles. After the first book convincingly answered the question of the historical Jesus, its sequel explained to the convert how and where the new religious community, of which he was now a member, had expanded.

As documentary evidence, the conversion of Theophilus and even the whole proem to Luke have been largely overlooked by modern research on the historical Jesus. On one point the proem has often been criticized: its author allegedly pieced it together from the standard topoi to satisfy a literary convention. Lip service of this kind is of course not unknown in ancient historiography. Theophilus however, concerned not with literature but with a decision of fundamental importance to his life, would hardly have
been satisfied with just literary commonplaces. Luke's statements in the proem should therefore be taken seriously, and from these we should draw the necessary conclusions about the historicity of his gospel and of the life of Jesus. Luke, naturally, is as prone to error as the other historians who applied diligence to their research and writing; here one need only recall his best known oversight, the imperial census of Augustus in his account of the Christmas story (2.1).

With the disciples' decision to follow the Lord's instructions and to carry the gospel beyond the outreach of his own earlier activity, the question of the historical Jesus was posed for the first time. The original community had been a fellowship of eyewitnesses, satisfied with their own recollections. Missionary work transformed these personal memories into narrated history. For what could it have meant to evangelize among people who had never before heard anything about the man of Nazareth? Luke and the other two synoptic writers supply the answer in their gospels: it was necessary first to tell the audience about Jesus, his family and his first public appearance, his wanderings and the miracles he had performed, his parables, warnings and prophecies, and finally about his death, resurrection and ascent to heaven. How could anyone have been encouraged to become a follower if the addressee did not even know Jesus? This point has not been sufficiently considered by theologians who assign a subsidiary role to the Jesus story within the missionary process. In the synagogues, where the missionaries typically began their work, they tried to demonstrate that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. But this could not be proved without reporting extensively about his life. On this point there was no difference between the missionary activity concerning Jews and pagans, and perhaps this is one reason why Luke contents himself to give no details beyond just Theophilus' name. It is not known whether the latter was a Jew or a proselyte, a heathen or one of the god-fearing individuals who had indeed approached the Jewish faith but had not been able to decide on full conversion, and consequently also on circumcision and observance of the strict ritual code.

With reference to the protracted debate about the literary genre of the gospels, or whether it is at all possible to classify them under one of the well-known genres, it follows that they were in the first place historical Jesus narratives, intended for evangelizing; this role had already been recognized by the precursors mentioned by Luke, and it applied equally to the last of the evangelists. John originally concluded his gospel with an assurance that many additional wondrous signs had also been given by Jesus; this is followed by the author's comment that those contained in his own narrative
were recorded: 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' (20, 30-31).

The transition from recollection to history is reflected more than once in the Acts of the Apostles. In the pentecostal sermon delivered in Jerusalem after the ascension of Jesus, Christianity's first missionary sermon, Peter made reference to the wonders and signs worked by God through Jesus—adding 'in your midst, as you yourselves know' (2.22). Everyone in Jerusalem would still have remembered these. Again, when Peter converted the centurion Cornelius and his household at Caesarea, and in his sermon, speaking explicitly as eyewitness, gave a summary of Jesus' life, he introduced that overview with the words 'you know' (10.36). Naturally much would have been heard about Jesus at the governor's residence; perhaps the centurion had even encountered him at the trial before Pilate.

While Peter was successful at Caesarea because he made use of the Jesus biography in his work of evangelizing, Paul failed when in his speech before the Athenian Areopagus he relied on theological and philosophical arguments and then moved on immediately to the resurrection of the dead (Acts 17.22-23). Luke while composing this speech had before him the Pauline letters, where in fact the story of Jesus plays only an insignificant role. Paul restricts himself to a few facts, notably the passion and the resurrection—a circumstance taken by some interpreters as evidence that the story of Jesus was of secondary significance in the evangelizing process. What they overlook however is that the letters of Paul, like all the other letters of the New Testament, are addressed to existing communities, and not to communities still to be established. In addition, there are enough suggestions that the travelling apostle had become thoroughly familiar with the full history of Jesus, and also took for granted such knowledge among his addressees. Any missionary opening his sermon with the passion or the 'scandal of the cross' would have forfeited the sympathy of an audience who were subject to Roman law and who knew that crucifixion was the regular punishment for slaves and serious criminals. Equally inappropriate to the start of the evangelizing process were the contents of the collected sayings of Jesus. This collection, which entered the gospels and has a parallel in the apocryphal gospel of Thomas, could only be understood, and its injunctions followed, in the context of the Jesus biography. Certainly the compilation was only made in one of the existing communities.

The selection of Matthias to replace the traitor Judas Ischariot in the circle of the apostles was likewise connected with the transition from recollection to history. The details surrounding his election are disputed, and Luke makes no special reference to the background, namely the concern in the original community that the evangelizing process might lead to the diffusion of a picture of Jesus which bore little relation to the historical Jesus. This possibility increased in proportion as the evangelists left
Judaea and Galilee, the world in which the Lord and his disciples had lived and worked. The risk could easily be foreseen in a society where news was transmitted largely by word of mouth and where it was a common experience that persons and events were altered beyond all recognition in the ‘information chain’. To counter such distortion an additional eyewitness should be summoned in Jerusalem. The successor was required by Peter to be a man who, like all the other apostles, had accompanied Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry to the end, from the baptism by John to his ascension. Since two candidates met this requirement, the matter was decided by the lot, which fell to Matthias (Acts 1.15–26). As eyewitnesses the apostles were living guarantors for the story of Jesus, which they could proclaim and interpret with authority and authenticity especially in difficult cases ranging from calumny and distortion to the denial of Jesus’ existence.

He who hears you hears me’: with these words, according to Luke, Jesus had given legitimacy to the disciples (10.16) when he sent out 72 to proclaim that the kingdom of God was at hand. This passage, like a number of others, was shaped under the impression of the later evangelizing. This also explains why the apostles were sent out in pairs, as Mark notes (6.7). *Unus testis, nulius testis* was an ancient Jewish legal principle (Deut. 19.5; Mat. 18.16) which acquired a new significance when missionaries reported the miracles of Jesus. Paul in particular found it important to have an eyewitness present, since he had never encountered Jesus himself and was therefore attacked more than once as a false apostle. His companion Barnabas, who had previously already moved in the apostolic circle (Acts 4.36), probably had first-hand experience of Jesus, as did the second associate Silas. For this reason both ranked as ‘leading men among the brethren’ (Acts 15.22). Inhabitants of the little town of Lystra in Asia Minor then also saw Barnabas as Jesus, father of the gods, and Paul as the god Hermes, messenger of Zeus and interpreter of his words.

Evangelists became especially credible when they could point to someone who had been healed by Jesus. The blind beggar Bartimaeus of Jericho, whose eyesight had been restored by Jesus, followed his healer as living testimony to his power (Mk. 10.52). An analogous episode is found in Acts, where Peter and John after healing a lame beggar were arrested and interrogated in the synhedron. The council however did not dare to take action against them since the healed man accompanied them and the people were impressed by the miracle (3.1–10; 4.1–22). Hence one is also inclined to give credence to the apologist Quadratus, writing under Hadrian (117–138), who will therefore have been born in the last third of the first century A.D. His remark is reported in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius: people who had been healed by Jesus were not only seen during the latter’s lifetime, but also long afterwards and down to Quadratus’ own
day (4:3:1-2). Nor are these witnesses likely to have been just fabrications by the apologists, following the pattern of Matthew's gospel where two blind men proclaimed Jesus after he had restored their sight (9:27-31).

III

From all this it becomes clear that *asaphelos*, the central concept in Luke's prose, is also of essential significance in the evangelizing process. Before communities could be formed or the new teachings expounded to their members, the individual who was breaking with his previous life had to be certain that he was treading on historically firm ground. How else could a Theophilus (if indeed he were Jewish) have abandoned the ancient religion of his forefathers to follow a man whom the high priests of Jerusalem had handed over to the Romans for execution? Even a heathen Theophilus would not easily have been convinced by Jesus in the first century A.D. For it was hardly the case that adherents of a declining paganism in the Roman empire were simply waiting to be delivered by the Christians, as devout spirits later liked to imagine. Much rather the evangelists began their work in the face of vigorous competition.

Religious life, common cults and festivals were practised in the cities in accordance with the patria normis or ancestral custom. This would have applied even more to the conservative rural areas, about which our information is virtually non-existent. The decline of these old forms because they failed to satisfy religious feeling is a conclusion often drawn from the testimonia of a narrow upper stratum, but this will hardly be valid as a generalization. People remained faithful to their gods in the knowledge that they were more powerful than humans, and could help or harm. Who could say that to neglect them would not be to invite their vengeance? There was an extensive flourishing of cultic associations which met privately on social, professional or national basis to pay parthemic homage to individual deities. In addition there were the eastern mystery cults which attracted followers also in the western Roman empire during the first century A.D.—the cults of Isis from Egypt, of Astartes from Syria, of the Magna Mater and of Attis from Asia Minor, and the Mithraus cult from Persia. Initiates into the secret circle were promised deliverance and salvation, often also a life of happiness after death. The priest concluded the mystic ceremony with the profession, 'Be of good cheer, initiates of the delivered god, for deliverance from hardship shall be yours.' Church writers like Firmicus Maternus, who has preserved the line (De secretis profanorum religionum 22.1), were subsequently at pains to neutralize these and other similarities with Christianity.

The philosophical schools too—Stoics and Epicureans, Platonists and even Neopythagoreans—offered various methods how to live a meaningful life. The Stoics extended its influence in the upper classes of the empire not
least because it combined a convincing conception of divinity with high ethical claims. In this way philosophy could easily become a substitute for religion. In addition philosophical ideas, especially Stoic and Platonic, penetrated the mystery cults. In times of political upheaval many felt attracted to the 'Garden' of Epicurus, who preached a quietistic life dedicated to the sensible pursuit of pleasure. Hence also his advice not to fear the gods, because they existed in complete detachment from the world in the intermundia. They had no concern for humans, who were therefore themselves under no obligation to thank or honour them with prayer and sacrifice. And finally the Skeptics taught that man had to be content with sensory impressions and opinions, without ever attaining the truth. Consequently no firm pronouncements on god or the gods were possible.

Eudaimonia, a terrestrial happiness founded on tranquillity of the soul, was what all the philosophies wanted to impart to their adherents, and extensive literature on the subject was available. Even if its readers were limited in number, itinerant philosophers, who were often followed by a throng of their disciples, reached a much larger audience in public places and markets. Astrologers and magicians exerted a still more powerful attraction, enthralling alike the imperial house and the common man struggling for his daily existence. Here the boundaries with religion were shifting. Not so in the imperial cult which became a component of the official religion in individual cities: temples and statues were dedicated to the emperor by the citizens, while particular priests saw to it that the honours paid to the ruling family rivalled those to the family of the gods.

Such was the massive stronghold of pagan culture and religion confronting Christ's disciples, which they tried to breach in the hope of gaining a foothold within. While the Jew would abandon the law by which he had hitherto been bound, but which had also offered support to him and many generations before him, the heathen should renounce his freedom. For in the variegated pagan world it was possible at one time to be an adherent of the most diverse religions and mystery cults, philosophies and magical sects. For the Christians however there was no place for this tolerant and calming syncretism. The convert was also prohibited henceforth from participating in the religious festivals of his city, in their serious as well as in their frivolous forms. He could no longer visit the theater or the gladiatorial games, since performances were preceded by worship of the gods or the emperor. Hatred of mankind, odium humani generis, was therefore a ready reproach with which the Christian had to live (Tacitus, Ann. 15.44.4). To this were added other prohibitions. Paul's campaign against fornication (porneia) becomes intelligible when one considers the housing plan of Pompeii: some 20 brothels are attested in the excavated part, from which at least twice that number may be conjectured for the entire city. And yet Pompeii was just a respectable little country town of
mid-Italy. It could not be compared with the large port cities of Ephesus and Corinth-Kenchreai, still less with the disreputable Antioch, not only home to one of the oldest Christian communities outside Jerusalem but also the base for four Roman legions whose soldiers were not permitted to marry during their term of service. Pornēs likewise provided some orgiastic cults with many a convert.

Christians were expected to be on their guard against even the more harmless pleasures. From a later period we know how the devout suffered pangs of conscience for having read in the beloved pagan classics. The new convert suddenly found himself at the periphery of society—in the place where the Jew had once been. But the Jew at least belonged to a recognized ancient religion and enjoyed certain privileges. These no longer extended to the new convert, who could also find himself in danger if it occurred to a neighbour to denounce him to the authorities for impiety, membership of a secret society or an attitude hostile to the state.

Finally, the desire for asphaleia before the final act of conversion with all its serious consequences was also understandable because in both past and present there were in circulation many stories about 'godlike men', similar to Jesus, who had performed miracles like those ascribed to him by his followers: thus Pythagoras had reputedly been in the underworld, and had returned. Of Plato it was said that his mother had conceived him by a god. Somewhat younger than Jesus was Apollonius of Tyana in Asia Minor, who healed the sick and even brought a dead girl back to life. These are just a few examples from a larger repertoire to which charlatans too made substantial contributions. To a thoughtful observer such parallels might easily strip the new Jewish messiah of the singular uniqueness which the evangelists liked to emphasize. And it would have been equally fatal to their religious mission if their audience had gained the impression that they were not keeping to verifiable facts but were simply adding to the already ample score of divine and heroic myths, prone to easy manipulation.

When a man felt drawn to the teachings of Jesus without however having unqualified trust in even a pair of disciples, there was another way of finding certainty, neither difficult nor unusual: a Jew who was prepared to convert, and who initially continued his pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the high feasts or to deliver the temple tax from the diaspora communities, could use the occasion to gather items of information about Jesus. It would be surprising if, during the one and a half years of Paul's stay in Corinth, or during the two and a half years he spent in Ephesus, no eyewitness had arrived from Jerusalem with verified information. That the clashes between Paul and members of the local synagogue in the two towns occurred not immediately but only after some time, will be
related to the circumstance that he was corroborated, either intentionally or unintentionally, by pilgrims who had returned from Jerusalem. Other evangelists must have had similar experiences. The efficient functioning of lines of communication between Jerusalem and the furthest diaspora is well attested in the final chapter of Acts. When Paul arrived as captive in Rome, he applied to the leaders of the local synagogue to explain why he had been brought to the capital. They replied that no letters concerning him had yet been received from Judaea, nor had any Jew coming from there said anything to Paul's discredit (28:21). This shows that they took for granted communication of this kind.

This free flow of news was also used by the godfearing and the pagans. In addition, they could question travellers to and from Judaea, or ask traders, soldiers or tourists to gather information for them. Favourable transport routes throughout the Roman empire meant that news could travel in many ways—for the areas around the Mediterranean, where the disciples began their evangelizing, formed a political and economic sphere with rapid and reliable (because verifiable) communications. It was probably only in the second half of the 19th century that modern systems of transport and communication surpassed the speed at which news travelled over distances such as those encompassed by the Roman empire. Furthermore, the first Christian communities were established in cities on busy land and sea routes. The port city of Ephesus was at the endpoint of the two major roads crossing Asia Minor, the southern one running through the Meander valley, the northern route through the valley of the Hebrus. Even a province like Galatia in inner Anatolia was crossed by a network of roads, maintained in the tranquil period of the early principate by emperor and communities. Philippi and Thessalonica were major cities on the Via Egnatia, which linked the Adriatic with the Black Sea. The corn transports which sailed back and forth between Egypt and Italy might have brought Christianity to Puteoli and Rome.

A further factor contributing to diffusion and communication was that Christianity took root among freedmen, a class that moved about very easily. Numerous names in the Pauline writings, actually, do not refer to slaves but to freedmen who, according to the normal practice, continued to use their former slave names. Freedmen were especially drawn to the new religion in which the social distinctions among believers were irrelevant. Unlike slaves, a freedman no longer needed to request his master's permission to attend a foreign evangelist's sermon or religious service. Greek freedmen became metics or resident aliens in the city of their emancipator, sometimes also full citizens; every Roman freedman acquired Roman citizenship and consequently had a higher legal standing than the provincials who made up the vast majority of the empire's population. Some gained substantial wealth in trade and commerce, as doctors, teachers
or architects. And people like these would certainly not have been naive or credulous. None of them, reflecting on the consequences for his newly won status, is likely to have rushed into conversion—neither Lydia, a dealer in purple fabric from Thyatira in Asia Minor, who had her own house and business in Macedonian Philippi (Acts 16.14–15; 40), nor Onesiphorus of Ephesus, who visited Paul in prison in Rome, probably while spending some time in the capital on a business trip (2 Tim. 1.16–18). Lydia and Onesiphorus were typical slave names whereas the individuals, judging by their activity, must have been freedmen. Paul himself confirmed the caution of the converts when in the first letter to the Corinthians he ironically imputed to the community an unthinking acceptance of the faith (15.2).

A family father who allowed a community to be formed under his roof assumed responsibility for all who were subject to his paternal authority. Onesiphorus’ journey from Ephesus to Rome takes us on to a further aspect, namely the communication between the nascent Christian communities, attested several times in Acts, in the letters of the New Testament and in the writings of the Church Fathers. Like individuals who decided on conversion, the communities which were subsequently formed were not exempt from various doubts. The most frequent point of objection, as in Paul’s speech before the Athenian Areopagus, was the resurrection of Jesus—one reason why Paul gave such emphasis to this and the passion. Nowhere did he do this more impressively than in the first letter to the Corinthians, where like an advocate or an historian he invoked a long line of witnesses: the risen Jesus ‘was seen first by Cephas, then by the twelve, then by more than 500 brethren at once, many of whom are still alive, although some have died; then he was seen by James, and then by all the apostles, finally also by Paul himself’ (15.5–8). Behind the list of names lies the request to consult these other witnesses in case Paul was not believed—a reasonable conclusion, given the high level of communication described above. It was also possible to inquire in other communities which had not been founded by Paul. It would have been disastrous for the development of Christianity if individual communities had held totally divergent pictures of Jesus: the religion of Jesus would soon have fragmented into individual groups of sectarians and traces of the historical Jesus would have been lost after a few years—a fate which overtook the founders of many religious and philosophical communities.

The apostles and the other missionaries knew the world in which they were to carry out their work well enough to realize that their statements about Jesus could easily be checked. Consequently to avoid contradictions and to offer their critics no openings for attack, eyewitnesses and those who had personally heard them in turn were bound to adhere, in making their statements, to what they had actually seen or heard. In the story of Jesus they spread, there was agreement on the main points: it was
the unbroken account from his first attested appearance in Galilee to his ascension. The so-called paschal division, which differentiates between a pre-Easter historical Jesus, no longer recoverable, and a post-Easter Christ whose picture developed in the original community and was spread by the evangelists, is a fiction: given the realities of communication, such a construct would quickly have dissolved. No convert would allow himself to be confounded by the consideration that, in a tradition that spread originally by word of mouth, personal impressions and recollections led to a number of divergent details. These differences later found expression in the gospels, each of which treated the subject matter in an individual form and style. Given the underlying oral tradition, this was no more than what was to be expected.

Since there is no hint in the Christian sources of the extensive patterns of communication which were inseparable from the evangelizing process from its very beginning, theologians and historians have overlooked the importance of these communicative aspects as evidence for the history of Jesus (to which I should add however that I am familiar with only a small part of modern research on the historical Jesus). I have found a single direct reference to believers travelling to Judaea in search of supporting confirmation. It comes from the apocryphal literature, in the pseudo-Clementine Homilies and Recognitions, which agree in their accounts of how Clement of Rome, later the fourth pope, was converted. After unsuccessful experiments with the various philosophical schools and Egyptian religion, he heard of Jesus and met the apostle Barnabas, then evangelizing in Rome. He subsequently travelled to Judaea, where he joined Peter (Recognitions 1.12; Homilies 1.8-8). The anonymous author of these works, who lived in the second century, ascribed the Judaean journey to Clement because he knew that such voyages to the Holy Land were actually undertaken by people desirous of conversion.

One reason why comparable references are not to be expected in the gospels is that these do not go beyond their strict narrative frames, i.e. beyond the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Only Luke’s proemium and the conclusion of John’s gospel, mentioned above, both of which address the evangelizing process, rupture their historical present. John, like Luke, wants to offer the reader certainty through his written account; and in John that statement (20.30-31) is directly preceded by the section on the doubting Thomas. In this way the credibility of the resurrection, and consequently of Jesus’ entire work, is woven into a narrative in a highly effective manner. This is a specific characteristic of John not found in the synoptic writers. Thomas was the archetypal symbol of the man who desired conversion but knew Jesus only from the reports of the disciples, and therefore required tangible certainty.
On the question of this certainty, there is another statement in Luke's proemium behind which we may detect a reference to the multiple possibilities of communication as discussed above: it is 'the many who have undertaken to write an account of an event,'. It has generally been assumed that the evangelist here employs a rhetorical plural, since he could only have known and used the gospel of Mark and the collection of Jesus' sayings. But this statement, too, should be taken literally. Luke's remark cannot refer to the first Christian communities in Jerusalem, Galilee and Judaea—for, as stated above, they would not have required written accounts. Much rather, Luke appears to have in mind the correspondence conducted from those centres with Christian communities and individuals eager for conversion in other provinces. The authors in question wrote of their own accord in support of the evangelizing effort, or they were responding to the questions of those who, like Theophilus, needed to have historical certainty. This written literature, which began early and drew on the direct tradition, helped especially to establish the dicta of Jesus, which were exposed to greater risks in the process of oral transmission than were the facta. If all parts of the Roman empire had had the same climatic conditions as in Egypt, where the papyri attest to both the amplitude and diffusion of private correspondence, then surely sufficient testimonia would have come to light to confirm Luke's statement.

Among the 'many' who invoked the eyewitnesses and servants of the word, there were already authors who were writing to counteract the benevolent or malicious proliferations which, either orally or in writing, were covering over and obscuring the historical Jesus. Their efforts touch on a further process which establishes the historical substance of the gospels, namely the formation of the New Testament canon in the second century. The synoptic gospels entered the canon because multiple exchanges during the earliest missionary period had helped to corroborate their authenticity, and because they took their definitive form in a period when the very last chance offered itself to question the eyewitnesses. Furthermore, surviving members of this group were dispersed to every part of the Roman world after the Jewish war and the conquest of Jerusalem in the year 70. The evangelists in writing their gospels consciously eliminated anything that had not been validated in the earlier processes of exchange and communication: critically sifting their material, they rejected those fanciful stories that subsequently found their way into the apocryphal gospels from the second century onwards. The gospel of John entered the canon because, according to an early tradition, its author had himself been an eyewitness. And all four gospels inspired additional confidence through their sober and unadorned language which left no room for anyone to suspect learned rhetorical amplification.
The dogmatic constitution Dei verbum, passed by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, repeats a recommendation made in 1943 by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical Divino afflante Spiritu: for a correct understanding of the evangelists' works, the interpreter needs to pay attention not only to the literary forms current at the time the gospels were written, but also to those forms qui illo aevi in mutuo hominum commercio passim adhiberi solabant, 'which at that time used to be practised everywhere in the mutual communication among men' (cap. 3, art. 12). The first part of the recommendation is in essence a tribute to the formal and redactional history which occupied a prominent position in the first half of the twentieth century, especially among protestant exegetes—but which had also frequently neglected, or even called into question, the direct value of the gospels as historical sources. In response to this, research since the fifties has gained new insights into the historical substance of the gospels, yet has failed, as far as I can see, to consider the concrete mutuum hominum commercium. My observations have attempted to add something to both parts of the Vatican recommendation and to demonstrate how literary forms and 'mutual communication among men' together support the credibility of the gospels.
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