THE AUTHORIZED VERSION OF HIS BIRTH AND DEATH

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The term *New Testament* is used today to specify a closed collection of twenty-seven specific writings. The manuscript tradition demonstrates that this collection was transmitted in four volumes: The Four-Gospel-Book, Acts and General Letters, Letters of Paul, and Revelation of John. The dates of the oldest manuscripts and the evidence from the first documented readers of the New Testament (Irenaeus, Tatian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen) further indicate that the first edition was in existence by the second half of the second century.[1] What would a second-century person, reading the New Testament at face value and without the benefit of scholarly historical research, have gleaned from this collection of writings about the birth and the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? The following passages are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version.

The first sentence of the Letters of Paul offers a definition of the contents of the "Gospel" (ευαγγελιον, *eu-angelion*, good news), God's central message:

> Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the Gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (Rom 1:1–6)

According to Paul, the Gospel as it was foretold by the prophets of the Holy Scriptures identifies Jesus as the Christ for two reasons. The

first reason is that Jesus was a descendant of the royal house of David, and the second reason is that Jesus' Resurrection clearly demonstrates that he was Son of God with exceptional spiritual powers. Paul finishes by stating that his apostleship is dedicated to promoting the obedience of faith in Jesus Christ among the nations, i.e., among people living outside of Judea.

Although the very first information readers of Romans receive about Jesus is that Jesus is from the royal family of David, Paul, the implied author of all fourteen canonical letters of Paul, does not elaborate much on this point. In 1 Timothy, literary Paul orders Timothy, a pastor in training, to charge "certain people" not to "occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith" (1 Tm 1:4). A reader of the New Testament will quickly discover that the Gospels offer two contradicting genealogies of Jesus (Mt 1:1–17 and Lk 3:23–38) and may rightly assume that Paul in 1 Timothy warns his followers not to waste their time with useless speculations on how to reconcile them. Other than that, canonical Paul is silent about Jesus' relation to the royal house of David. When it comes to Jesus' Resurrection, however, Paul is more eloquent:

> For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1 Cor 15:3–4)

Paul gives an outline of the events following Jesus' death as they had been passed on to him. The context suggests that Paul is defending himself against accusations of being uninformed about the historical Jesus, and therefore takes the utmost care to represent the tradition he had received accurately (1 Cor 15:1–3).

Paul was told that Christ died, was buried, and raised the third day according to the scriptures. The reference to the scriptures provides the readers with a link to Paul's statement in Romans 1:1 that the Gospel was promised beforehand in the writings of the prophets. To this point Paul's statements conform nicely with the traditions of the canonical Gospels. But the text continues with a series of six events, all of which are unparalleled:

> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor 15:3–8)

Paul states that Christ first appeared to Cephas (Peter). One of the few traditions all four Gospels share is that women were the first to discover the empty tomb (Mt 28:1–8; Mk 16:1–8; Lk 24:1–11; Jn 20:1). This tradition is curiously absent in Paul. Except for an obscure note in Luke 24:34, there is no hint that Jesus appeared to Peter separately.

Paul continues that Christ then appeared to the twelve. But according to Matthew and Luke (Mt 27:3–10; cf. Acts 1:18–19), Judas committed suicide even before Jesus died on the cross and therefore Jesus could only have appeared to the eleven (Mt 28:16; Lk 24:9.33; cf. Mk 16:14), not the twelve. Paul seems unfamiliar with the tradition of Judas's suicide. Then Christ appeared to more than five hundred. There is no such story in the Gospels, and the statement is even more surprising as Paul gives living proof: some witnesses are still alive and ready to testify.

The differences continue. Christ, Paul insists, then appeared to his brother James. This story, sorely missing from the Gospel accounts, nicely explains why the Lord's brother received the high recognition among the Early Christian community, which Paul attests to him in Galatians (Gal 1:19; 2:9.12).

Paul insists that Christ then appeared to "all the apostles." This statement is confusing. What exactly is an "apostle" in this context? Are the twelve not "all" the apostles? Is Cephas who is mentioned separate from the twelve not an apostle (cf. 1 Cor 9:5)? And isn't Paul an apostle as well? Or is the term *apostle* defined as someone who "sees" the resurrected Christ (cf. 1 Cor 9:1)? However Paul's language is explained, this statement is difficult to reconcile with the Gospel accounts. Paul's last remark is more compromising than all the others put together. Paul writes: "Last of all he appeared also to me" (1 Cor 15:8).

When Paul talks about his experiences of Christ, he calls them revelations (Gal 1:12) or visions (12:1). Like dreams, these visions are subjective and irrelevant to any other person than the one who experiences them. Paul describes his revelations as an out-of-body experience in 2

Cor 12:1–10: "whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows" (12:3.4).

For Paul, all Resurrection accounts of 1 Corinthians 15 are "appearance" stories. The term ωφθη (he appeared) is used for each of the six events. Revelation is a spiritual experience, a vision, a dream. For Paul, Christ is not a "real" person. The notion that the resurrected Jesus existed physically, that he would eat (Lk 24:43), that his wounds could be touched (Jn 20:27), is not what Paul had been taught.

Paul's statements sharply contrast what the Gospel According to Mark has to offer to its readers:

> They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.
>
> When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mk 10:46–52)

The only time Mark makes an allusion to Jesus being from the royal family of David is in the story of blind beggar Bartimaeus, who cries out "Son of David" (Mark 10:46f). His shouting is a public embarrassment, and he is ordered to be quiet. Readers will hardly see the scene as an endorsement of Jesus' ancestry.

And when it comes to providing an account of Jesus' Resurrection, Mark is silent:

> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.
>
> But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." (Mk 16:5–7)

The women encounter a nameless young man in a white gown at the empty tomb who tells them that Jesus was raised from the dead and

that they should tell the disciples and Peter to go ahead to Galilee, where he will meet them. But what do the women do?

> So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mk 16:8)

They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (εφοβουντο γαρ). This is the last sentence of Mark's Gospel. The resurrected Christ has not appeared and the first witnesses "say nothing to anyone." This is the worst imaginable ending for a Gospel.

Measured against Paul's definition of what the Gospel of God is about, Mark fails on both accounts. Jesus is not portrayed as a son of David, and there is no Resurrection story of Jesus. The readers are left with allusions to Jesus' Resurrection provided by an unidentified young man in a white robe.

But only the oldest manuscripts of Mark end with verse 8. The vast majority of manuscripts provide the so-called long ending. The long ending of Mark gives us a rare window into the struggles of early editors of the New Testament as they attempt to provide an authoritative version of the Resurrection accounts:

> Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. (Mk 16:9–11)

The appearance of the resurrected Christ to Mary is taken from John 20:

> After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.
>
> Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

> And he said to them, "*Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.*" (Mk 16:12–16)

The story of the two disciples walking into the country is taken from Luke 24. The dinner of the disciples on Easter Sunday is told in Luke 24 and John 20. Both stories mention a lack of faith (Lk 24:38; Jn 20:24–28). And finally, which reader of the New Testament would not immediately relate Jesus' commission "To go into the world" and "baptize" to the last scene of Matthew's Gospel, the so-called Great Commission (Mt 28:16–20)?

So the long ending in Mark compensates for the unsatisfying and abrupt end of Mark by combining the accounts of Matthew, Luke, and John. There is more to come:

> "*And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.*"
>
> So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.
>
> And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it. (Mk 16:17–20)

Narratives about speaking in foreign languages (Acts 2:6–8), about surviving snakebites (Acts 28:5), and about the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:9) are found in Acts. The last sentence of the long ending: "And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere," reads like a summary of the plot of Acts.

The long ending of Mark combines all four Gospels and adds the testimony of Acts. It can be read as an early attempt to harmonize the accounts of the events following Jesus' Resurrection. But—and this needs to be stated clearly—the New Testament is not a harmony. It provides four distinct Gospels with four distinct accounts.

The Gospel According to Matthew, as title of this book is transmitted in the manuscripts of the Four-Gospel-Book, begins with a genealogy of Jesus:

> Jesse was the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, [the line is continued from here to Joseph, father of Jesus]. (Mt 1:6–7)

The implied author, Matthew the tax-collector (Mt 9:9), is perceived by readers as someone who professionally deals with official records. He states that Jesus is related to King David through David's son Solomon. Furthermore, Matthew insists that Joseph and Mary have been living all their lives, like their ancestors, in Bethlehem (cf. Mt 2:1).

The difficulty Matthew and any other Gospel writer face, is to explain how someone called Jesus of Nazareth could be linked to David. By making Jesus' parents citizens of Bethlehem the narrative solves part of the problem. But why did Jesus move to Nazareth? Why did he not stay in Bethlehem?

> There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean." [οτι Ναζωραιος κληθησεται] (Mt 2:23)

The narrator solves the mystery by insisting that the scriptures predicted the Messiah to be called a "Ναζωραιος." The narrative context (cf. Mt 4:13; 21:11; 26:71) suggests beyond reasonable doubt that the term is used to designate a "Nazarene," a citizen of Nazareth. But no such scripture exists. Nazareth is not mentioned in the Jewish Bible.

In the Gospel According to Luke, the readers are presented with a genealogy of Jesus that differs from Matthew's records. Instead of relating Jesus through Solomon to David as Matthew does, the implied author, the physician Luke, relates Jesus to David through another son, Nathan. The discrepancy could not be bolder.

> [Jesus...] son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, [... son of Adam, the son of God.] (Lk 3:31–32)

And when it comes to the Gospel According to John, the readers are confronted with the notion that Jesus was present at the creation of the

world, long before King David was born. The question whether Jesus was actually related by blood to the royal family suddenly seems irrelevant:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1–4:14)

"What good can come from Nazareth?" Nathanael asks a few lines down in this Gospel (Jn 1:46), and Philip gives him an answer that feels true for many evangelicals, mysticists, Pentecostals, Mormons, Isa Muslims, and anyone who bases religious convictions on the spiritual experience of Christ: "Come and see!" They may not have a solution that is intellectually satisfying, but they promise that anyone who joins their group will make spiritual experiences that back up the claim that Jesus is the Christ.

A second-century reader of the New Testament, who followed Paul's outline of what the Gospel is about, would have been confronted with the following information.

Concerning Jesus as the Son of David, Matthew and Luke provide different genealogies of Jesus—something that is biologically impossible. Mark makes no statement about it, and John insists that the question is irrelevant.

When it comes to the Resurrection events, Matthew and Luke do not agree where Christ appeared to his disciples. Matthew places the event on a mountain in Galilee, Luke in Jerusalem. Mark suggests Galilee but lacks a story, and John combines both traditions, providing stories in Jerusalem and Galilee. And Paul, the maverick apostle, disagrees with each of these accounts.

What is the version of Jesus' ancestry and Resurrection promoted in the New Testament and regarded as authoritative by the Christian movement for almost two millennia? The answer is rather simple. The New Testament does not provide an authorized version of the birth and Resurrection accounts of Jesus of Nazareth.

Editors, translators, and commentators of the New Testament have struggled and will always struggle with the apparent diversity of voices. The title of the first volume of the New Testament that contains the four canonical Gospels is preserved in many manuscripts as τετραευαγγελιον (*tetra-euangelion*), and the uniform transmission and lack of variants for this title suggest that it was part of the archetype from which all manuscripts of the New Testament derive. *Tetra* signifies the number four, but *euangelion* (Gospel) is used in the singular. The title is impossible to translate into English but its intention is easy to grasp: as far back as the earliest edition of the New Testament, editors were aware of the significant discrepancies in the accounts of the four Gospels, and yet they insist that in this choir of witnesses there is a shared message.

And Paul, as was demonstrated above, follows a completely different narrative tradition.