

# Chapter 9

## Show me the evidence

When faced with a new idea it is right to ask about the evidence on which it is based. The prescriptions of the earliest physicians were often based on tradition, or a ‘try it and see’ attitude. The same can hold in some cultures still. In many places there used to be strong but misplaced faith in repeated blood-letting, and in Uganda about 40 years ago I saw a child with cerebral palsy who had multiple cigarette burns on his back. The pain had produced involuntary movements that he could not make on his own so this treatment, probably advised by a witch doctor, was thought to be a good thing. Today’s medical teams expect clear evidence before they accept new theories or therapies.

Yet in other areas, the tidy results of analysis may overlook matters of great importance. Thus, economists may find it more cost-effective to send certain patients to centres of excellence for treatment, even if far from their homes. Long known to paediatricians, there is now a lot of evidence that older people, too, recover better when supported by familiar people. They can be worried about the loss of time and money when visitors have to travel a long way, yet make slower progress without them. Cost-benefit analyses should explore such personal as well as cash costs. It is significant that most of the (limited) research literature is in nursing journals.

### Evidence for costs that are hard to measure

Some years ago, when deliberate child abuse was a new concern, a two year old with a bruised face was admitted to hospital on suspicion of this being non-accidental injury. Was the father’s story of a genuine accident to be believed? The child stayed in hospital until the matter could be settled by the magistrates, but he became depressed and unresponsive until his parents came round the ward door. He immediately leapt up, reached out to them and, safely back in their arms, became their happy little boy again. The before and after scenes

were caught on camera and said what the child could not have said for himself. The eyewitness record convinced the court to let him go home, and careful follow up showed this to have been the right thing to do.

When discussing matters of belief we also need trustworthy evidence. Changed behaviour backs up the story of changed beliefs, making the new believer's story much more acceptable. This is why some of Christ's earliest followers taught and wrote up the story of his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Their histories have such a ring of truth that over the centuries, millions who never knew the authors have since believed their evidence, to find their own lives changed as a result.<sup>1</sup>

## The Bible as reference book

In this exploration I shall use the Bible as our textbook. In a few parts it can be hard to understand but unlike some modern sceptics I accept that the Scriptures, as originally given, provide us with a record inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. This belief is supported not only by the writers themselves<sup>2,3</sup> but by respected biblical scholars. Mine will not be an academic study, but hopefully most of us can gain access to one of the many translations of the Bible, either as a book by our bedside or online.

As we carefully and prayerfully read his word, God helps us to understand it, not just speaking to our minds but also getting through to hearts and spirits.

We looked earlier at the repeated sacrifices recorded in the Old Testament, designed as they were to make a sinful people temporarily right with God again. As we turn to the good news told in the New Testament we find that, in his Son, God fulfilled many of the prophecies that spoke of a coming Messiah who would open up a permanent way for mankind to know peace with God. Some who had observed Jesus for themselves wrote up their observations, confirming that he truly fitted this identity. Jesus often quoted from those old books himself, claiming to be the one they had described all those years ago. What he did backed up the gracious things he said.

We cannot dismiss the Old Testament as being past its use-by date, or the New Testament records as just a made up story. They are both very much up-to-date and have been preserved to be believed and acted on.

## Books of the New Testament

The 27 New Testament documents together provide us with unique and reliable evidence about Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. They record and apply his teaching. The Gospels alone give many first-hand details of his wonderful works and words while many of the other books deal with how we should follow him faithfully in this life, looking forward to being made fully like him in the next. If the stories were made up, they would not have the unexpected outcome that many of them do have. They not only give us Jesus' life story but record his life-purpose and, if we open our inner ears, will come as the very word of God to our hearts, minds and consciences.

## The value of eyewitness records

One of those who had kept company with Jesus later sent a letter warning against false teaching about him. In it he said, 'We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty'.<sup>4</sup> There is little more convincing than such witnesses.

Some friends of mine got on very well with another couple, both doctors, but thought it odd that they openly held Christian beliefs. Then the Christian husband developed a malignant melanoma, unresponsive to treatment. He and his wife knew what was happening, but the friends were amazed at the way they faced his death. The patient seemed positively excited, for he knew that he was on the way to meet his Lord. The obvious peace and joy in his life at a time when they would have felt the opposite, convinced those who had never met this before to seek and find such faith for themselves. It added to their friend's joy that before he died he was able to help them to enjoy a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The evidence of his inner security was what had started their search and their own lives were transformed by this new relationship, even when they lost the old one.

## The New Testament authors: who's who

There are certain theologians, sometimes called higher critics, who question the traditional view that the Gospel stories are accurate, dismissing sections that they disagree with or genuinely doubt. However, many other scholars of repute have carefully studied evidence gained from research and believe that the accounts we have are authentic. (See also chapter 2). We are favoured to have more than one record of the unique person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first three Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke are based on eyewitness accounts (the so-called Synoptic Gospels). Unlike the others, Luke had not met Jesus. He composed his report from information given by those who had enjoyed knowing him. The fourth record, by John, was not so much the straightforward life story of Jesus that the other three gave, but a more thoughtful commentary on the meaning of his life, his miracles and his teaching. Like Luke, John probably wrote his book after a longer interval than the others. Between the four of them, they describe Jesus' matchless life from different angles and each gives most space to the final chapters of his earthly life, followed by his amazing resurrection and ascension. In truth, they were expert witnesses.

To get at the truth it is always helpful to hear more than one viewpoint, which is why legal trials call for a variety of witnesses. Different stories can be like pieces of a puzzle that, when fitted together, give a clearer picture of what really happened. Witnesses, as at Jesus' own final trial, do not always agree, but the stories told by our four gossellers are complementary, not contradictory.

*Matthew* had been a tax collector, called out of what was then a much-despised occupation to follow Jesus. His record simply states that Jesus saw him, sitting at his tax collector's booth. 'Follow me', he said, and Matthew got up and followed him. Even if he had already heard or even seen Jesus before, it says much for Jesus' magnetic appeal that a man making his living from money matters responded so promptly to his invitation to leave everything and follow.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps he was more used to being scorned, first because he worked for the Romans and

then because most tax collectors were suspected of helping themselves to some of the cash they collected. Whatever he was like when called, he followed Jesus to become one of his inner circle of twelve men known as apostles, or simply as the Twelve.

Probably writing with a Jewish readership in mind and with a professional interest in making things add up, Matthew particularly loved to use quotations from the Old Testament. He introduced them with remarks like, ‘This took place to fulfil what was spoken of through the prophet...’ or, about Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist, ‘This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah.’ This John was to be the herald Isaiah had spoken of who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

Before enlisting Matthew, Jesus had also called Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, James and *John*, another Gospel writer.<sup>6</sup> These four were fishermen and possibly not as worldly-wise as Matthew, yet they, too, promptly gave up their work when Jesus called them to follow him. According to the account in John’s Gospel, John the Baptist, the herald, had already pointed out Jesus to Andrew who, with his brother Simon, had then met Jesus and recognised that he was possibly the promised Messiah. When he called them to follow him they were therefore ready.

We are not told whether James and John had met Jesus before, but as members of the fishing community they would know that other fishermen had gone after him. When Jesus called them personally they immediately left their father to carry on the business with his other helpers. Later, Jesus would call James and John ‘sons of thunder’, hinting at their impetuous and possibly fiery disposition<sup>7</sup> but by the time he wrote his Gospel, the ageing John had become calmer and more reflective.

*Mark* does not feature by name in his Gospel and was probably much younger than the other gospels. Believers used to meet at his mother’s house in Jerusalem and they sometimes knew him as John.<sup>8</sup> That could be how he met Peter, whose memories he is thought to have drawn on later to write his shorter book, for at the end of his first

letter Peter speaks of Mark as being like a son to him. It is possible that Mark's account was the first and that other gossellers used his story as a help in writing theirs. Be that as it may, Mark's is the only Gospel to tell of a young man who escaped arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane when the crowd came by night to arrest Jesus. It is generally supposed that this is an autobiographical incident.

The final meal Jesus shared with his disciples took place in an upstairs room, conceivably one at the home where Mark lived with his mother. If so, as a curious teenager he might well have slipped out of bed to eavesdrop and when the party left for the garden he followed them, still in his nightshirt. His Gospel records how the linen garment was lost when someone tried to arrest the unnamed youth and the frightened boy ran off without it, by now in a big hurry to get safely back to his nice warm bed.

In his Gospel, Mark still comes over as a man in a hurry, eager to get down all that Peter was telling him. He writes with the galloping speed of someone bursting to tell all that he knows. The first three chapters of his Gospel are likely to leave the reader breathless, with his many mentions of 'at once', 'without delay', 'very early in the morning'. In the same space he mentions about ten times how the crowds followed Jesus about so that he had no time even to eat. It was a hectic schedule.

*John* became one of Jesus' closest friends and his Gospel differs from those of the other three, being more reflective and thoughtful about the events he describes. He starts by speaking of Jesus as 'the Word' who came to bring God's message of light and love to a dark world and to convey his majesty and glory. John the Baptist had announced his coming and called people to show by their baptism that they repented of their sins. Early on he identified Jesus as the Lamb of God, superior to one of the old sacrificial lambs because the atonement for sin that he offered would be once and for all, no longer necessary every year as in times past. John writes in his Gospel that those who receive Jesus will be welcomed as his children into the family of God, though only a few would do so during his time on earth.

John selects seven of Jesus' miracles as signs of his divinity when he showed his authority over the natural world, human disease and even death. As part of the whole person healing that was his ministry, when he cured people's illnesses he often spoke of forgiving their sins, changing their cries for help into praise of God, his Father.

John gives us the fullest record of the last teaching session when Jesus sat with the Twelve around the table for the annual Passover feast. This was (and by Jewish families still is) a reminder of the meal eaten before the exodus from Egypt. John leaves it to the other three Gospel writers to describe the new meaning that Jesus gave to this meal. From then on, Christians remember how he matched the bread and wine of the Passover meal with his own body and blood, so soon to be broken and poured out for us. He offered himself as a ransom for sin, replacing the sacrificial Passover lamb. Whether called Holy Communion, the Eucharist or simply the Lord's Supper, each simple service now reminds us of all that Jesus suffered for us and in thanksgiving we give ourselves back to him.

John is the only one to describe the humility of Jesus as he washed the feet of his friends, a courtesy they had all neglected before that final Passover meal. Afterwards, apart from Judas who had left to betray him, the disciples went with Jesus to a favourite place of theirs on the Mount of Olives known as the Garden of Gethsemane.

John remembers how Jesus still had important things to say before he left them. He spoke of how a vine will only produce fruit if the sap is free to flow and, in the same way, if they were to live fruitful lives they would need to stay connected to the infusion of new life he would give them. John quotes a long prayer later made by Jesus to his Father with requests for himself, his disciples and finally for those in the future who would come to believe in him. It was not long before Judas arrived with an armed gang and Jesus was arrested, most of the disciples deserting him.

From a modest reference it seems that John was known to the high priest, and could get in to his courtyard, hence his full report of the mock-trial that happened next and his knowledge of all that followed.

Although not named, he was probably the disciple asked by the dying Jesus to take his mother, Mary, and care for her like another son.<sup>9</sup>

## Jesus' last days on earth

The Gospel writers go into great detail about Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection. Between them, Matthew and Mark (also Luke) give most detail of the last hours spent in the garden. Jesus was in agony as he asked his Father to confirm that he must go through with the terrible ordeal about to happen. The late hour and the meal together sent his dearest friends to sleep just when Jesus most needed their support. One of them must have woken up enough to overhear and record some of his agonised prayers before he was given angelic comfort so that when the crowd arrived to arrest him he was again calm and trustful.

The Gospel writers had become convinced enough of Jesus' uniqueness to record their observations of his self-giving life, his miraculous works and, as it seemed to them at the time, the disappointments of his arrest, trial and death. Later they had such astonishing encounters with his resurrected person, changed but still recognisable, that when they saw him again they had no doubt about believing John's cry of, 'It is the Lord!'<sup>10</sup> Weeks later, Jesus returned to his Father, no doubt after days of revision, explanation and more teaching as he prepared them for his departure. He would send his comforting Spirit to help them to remember his teaching as they spread the good news of salvation, made disciples and wrote their books.<sup>11</sup>

Matthew and Mark end their Gospels with an account of Jesus' ascension after he had given his closest followers what is known as the Great Commission. They were to preach the good news across the world, making and baptising more disciples. Yet that was not to be the end of the story, for early in Luke's book of *Acts*, he describes Jesus' ascension but also describes the astonishing descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to inspire and energise the disciples' own spirits.<sup>12</sup>

You haven't yet been properly introduced to Dr. Luke, but we'll be hearing more from him later.

## For further thought

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- It is easy to have fixed ideas about the Christian faith without ever having studied it. The best place to start looking further would be to read one or more of the gospels.

## Further resources

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- Bruce FF. *The New Testament documents – Are they reliable?* Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981
- Bauckman R. *Jesus and the eyewitnesses*. Cambridge UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2006.

## References

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1. 2 Corinthians 5:16-17
2. John 21:24
3. 2 Timothy 3:16-17
4. 2 Peter 1:16
5. Matthew 9:9
6. Matthew 4:18-22
7. Mark 3:17
8. Acts 12:12
9. John 19:26-27
10. John 21:7
11. John 14:16, 25-26
12. Acts 2:1-41

