



GOSPEL TRUTH?

New Light on Jesus and the Gospels

Graham Stanton

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**To Roger, Michael
and Nicola**

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PREFACE

The recent wave of media interest in Jesus of Nazareth and in the origin of the Gospels has not surprised me. For many years now I have found that Christians and non-Christians alike are keen to inquire into the evidence for the life of Jesus and to consider the claims of the evangelists. Early versions of many parts of this book have been given as talks or lectures in settings as varied as modest village halls and splendid Cathedrals. Adults, students and sixth formers have plied me with questions which have often prompted me to consider issues or points of view I might otherwise have by-passed.

Over the past three or four years the reading public has not been well served by books published on Jesus and the Gospels. Too many have been written by sensation seekers who have twisted evidence to fit fancy theories. Although their books have been so inept that most scholars have not bothered to take them seriously, they have caught the eye of readers who have sorely needed a winnowing fork to sift the wheat from the chaff. Other books on Jesus and the Gospels have been written by journalists, some of whom have done little more than feed rather irresponsibly off the work of scholars.

For these reasons I accepted the request to write this book. The support and encouragement of my scholarly friends and colleagues are deeply appreciated. I am particularly grateful to those who have responded to my requests for advice, several of whom have generously sent me drafts or proofs of unpublished articles. I wish to acknowledge the help of the following scholars who are not in any way responsible for my conclusions: Prof. Dr Barbara Aland (Münster); Dr George Brooke (Manchester); Prof. James

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As always, my wife has helped in numerous ways. This book is dedicated to our three children to whom we owe so much.

Graham Stanton

2 July 1995

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CHAPTER I

SEARCHING FOR GOSPEL TRUTH

THIS BOOK BEGAN life at the breakfast table on Christmas Eve 1994. My 18-year-old daughter, knowing that study of Matthew's Gospel had taken up several years of my life, passed a copy of *The Times* to me and said, 'You'll be interested in this.' A front-page story was entitled, 'Oxford papyrus is "eyewitness record of the life of Christ"'. The article reported the claim by the German scholar, Dr Carsten Thiede, that three papyrus fragments of Matthew's Gospel held in Magdalen College Oxford library since 1901 date from the mid-first century, within twenty years or so of the life of Jesus.

'Not since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947', the story continued, 'has there been such a potentially important breakthrough in biblical scholarship.' *The Times* devoted nearly two full pages to Carsten Thiede's claims, including an editorial which likened the alleged new discovery not only to the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but also to Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's treasures in 1922, and to Schliemann's location of Troy. On 26 December *The Times* carried an extended interview with Dr Thiede, thereby giving still more oxygen to his claims about three tiny papyrus fragments of Matthew's Gospel.

Abraham Lincoln once said that *The Times* (founded in 1785) was one of the greatest powers in the world. While few would make that claim today, *The Times* is still an influential voice in the English-speaking world. What it says today is echoed in other countries tomorrow. Until recently *The Times* has rarely indulged in sensationalist reporting, so many readers have assumed that genuinely new evidence has been found for the early dating, eyewitness character and reliability of the Gospels.

I was surprised to learn that Matthew's Gospel had made the front page of *The Times*. I was equally surprised to find that my daughter, not known for her interest in the finer points of biblical scholarship, had already read avidly every word of the lengthy articles. Thiede's claims were reported in the BBC radio national news bulletins that same day, and were then picked up quickly in many parts of the world in television and radio programmes, and in newspapers and magazines.

In its 23 January 1995 issue the international edition of *Time* magazine devoted a full page to the story, with the provocative headline, *A Step Closer to Jesus?* In its cover story on Miracles on 10 April 1995, just before Easter, *Time* magazine drew attention once again to the importance of the alleged discovery.

As media people say, the story 'has legs'. Not since March 1963, when the Sunday newspaper, *The Observer*, published extracts from John Robinson's forthcoming book, *Honest to God*, has there been so much interest in the media in a story about the Bible or Christian Theology.

This wide interest is not unexpected. New discoveries which have a bearing on the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth will always catch the eye. Many Christians who hanker after 'proof' for their faith tend to snatch at such claims – and if in the process the noses of 'sceptical' scholars are put out of joint, so much the better. Many non-Christians who are fascinated by Jesus of Nazareth have a keen interest in new manuscript and archaeological discoveries.

Even allowing for possible exaggeration by a journalist from *The Times*, I was so astonished by the bold claims that even in the midst of preparations for a family Christmas, I faxed a letter to the Editor. I noted that since the initial publication of the papyrus fragments of Matthew in 1953, several leading palaeographers and New Testament scholars have dated the Oxford Matthew fragments to the end of the second century, or even early in the third century. I also suggested (mistakenly, as it has turned out) that Carsten Thiede's claims concerning the very early date and alleged eyewitness character of Matthew's Gospel would not merit serious discussion by specialists. Thiede's theory has attracted so much interest that, like it or not, specialists have been forced to discuss it.

In my letter to *The Times* I also drew attention to Carsten Thiede's equally controversial views about another papyrus fragment. I recalled an earlier front-page story *The Times* had run concerning a 'discovery' of a Biblical manuscript. On 16 March 1972 *The Times* reported the claim by the Spanish papyrologist José O'Callaghan that a papyrus fragment in Greek from Cave 7 at Qumran (7Q5) was part of Mark 6: 52-3. I recall vividly the moment when I read this story while travelling on a crowded commuter train from my home to King's College in central London, where I teach. That very day a colleague and I spent every spare moment following up the story in our library. We were amazed to discover that a photograph of the fragment had been under our noses in our own College library for ten years!

According to *The Times*, part of Mark's Gospel had allegedly turned up in the most surprising place of all: not in Rome, where most scholars thought it was written, but in a cave very close to the sectarian Jewish community at Qumran, near the Dead Sea. And since the scroll was hidden before the Roman Tenth Legion marched through the area in AD 68, Mark's Gospel must have been written earlier than most scholars had supposed. Many widely held views about earliest Christianity would have to be reconsidered.

O'Callaghan has continued to champion this theory; in 1984 Carsten Thiede joined the cause. For many years their views attracted little attention. Until recently, few specialists on Mark's Gospel took seriously the possibility that a fragment of Mark had been discovered in a cave near Qumran. Interest has now been fuelled by the publication in 1992 of Thiede's book, *The Earliest Gospel Manuscript? The Qumran Fragment 7Q5 and its Significance for New Testament Studies* which has made his views more widely known in the English-speaking world.¹ 1992 also saw the publication of an important set of scholarly papers by Thiede and others which were given at a symposium on the theory and its implications held in Eichstätt in Germany. The significance of these papers is only now being appreciated.²

This is also a story which will run and run in the months and years ahead. Has a fragment of a very early Christian writing been found in the library of a conservative Jewish community? I predict that very shortly the public will hear a great deal about the

claim that a fragment of Mark's Gospel has turned up among the Dead Sea Scrolls. This fascinating theory has already featured in several German television programmes.

There is plenty of precedent for keen interest in a story about the Scrolls. Ever since their discovery in 1948, they have featured regularly in the media and in mass market books. Long delays in the publication of the fragments have led to allegations of a Vatican conspiracy to hide evidence in the Scrolls said to be damaging to traditional Christianity. Several authors and publishers have recently cashed in unscrupulously on public interest in the Scrolls with bizarre claims about their importance for early Christianity.

So two intriguing stories about the origin of the Gospels are running in tandem. Papyrus fragments of parts of Matthew 26 and a papyrus fragment from a Dead Sea Scroll alleged to contain part of Mark 6 are both said to date from the first century, and thus underpin the reliability of the Gospels. Until now, the earliest surviving fragment of a New Testament writing is generally held to be a piece of papyrus from c. AD 125 with a few lines of John 18 on it (*see Plates 2 and 3*). If either of the new claims turns out to be correct, parts of the history of earliest Christianity will have to be rewritten from top to tail. This book includes the first full appraisal of both claims.



The Gospels are the foundation documents of Christianity. For Christians there is a great deal at stake when the Gospels are put under the scholar's microscope. Do they contain 'Gospel truth'? In the light of modern scholarship, what do we know about the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth?

On the further reaches of the right wing of contemporary Christianity (both Roman Catholic and Protestant), 'the truth of the Gospel' hangs on the historical reliability of every single word of all four Gospels. Interest in the new claims about the fragments of Matthew and Mark has been keenest in this wing of the church. On the radical left, some scholars insist that recent research has undermined the 'truth' of the Gospels: as products of the early church, they tell us next to nothing about Jesus of Nazareth. The earliest Christians, we are told, held such widely

diverging views about the significance of Jesus that we have to talk about a set of 'Christianities' – and modern Christians can pick and choose according to their tastes. I shall argue that at both ends of the spectrum justice is not being done to the historical evidence.

Since the Gospels are woven into many strands of our culture, they are also of perennial interest to non-Christians. On almost any definition, the Gospels are 'classic texts'. For nearly two thousand years they have had an impressive 'after-life', so they deserve to be taken very seriously indeed. Readers of this book, whether Christians or not, will expect me to set out the evidence fairly, and to take fully into account non-Christian as well as Christian sources. I am a Christian. My research and teaching are carried out in a School of Humanities proud of its international reputation. So my methods as a scholar have to pass muster with colleagues in departments of Classics, History and English.

Following the discussion in *Chapters II* and *III* of the papyrus fragments of Matthew and the alleged fragment of Mark, I turn in *Chapter IV* to the manuscript evidence for the text of the Gospels. How many early manuscripts do we have, and how reliable are they? I include a discussion of passages from the Gospels where there are important variations in the manuscripts.

In *Chapter V* I take up a baffling question: **What happened to traditions about the life and teaching of Jesus between his crucifixion and the writing of the earliest Gospel, Mark?** Even on a conservative dating of Mark's Gospel, there is a gap of about 35 years. Did eyewitnesses ensure that the Jesus traditions were transmitted with little or no distortion? Or did the beliefs and practices of the post-Easter Christian communities all but smother the original thrust of the teaching of Jesus?

Many scholars hold that Matthew and Luke both incorporated an earlier large collection of sayings of Jesus. This source, known as Q, has recently been referred to as a 'lost Gospel'. Is Q our most reliable source for the teaching of Jesus? Should this 230-verse source be referred to as a 'Gospel'? These questions are discussed in *Chapter VI*.

In the second century AD, a number of writings known as 'Gospels' failed to find their way into the New Testament. Since they are 'unofficial', even esoteric, they are of interest to many

today. Several writers have recently proposed that four of these 'Gospels' contain invaluable evidence for the serious student of the life of Jesus. These claims are discussed in *Chapter VII*. The chapter which follows examines how and why the early church eventually settled on *four* Gospels, no more, no less.

In the second half of this book, the focus changes from the Gospels to Jesus. *Chapter IX* discusses some recent archaeological discoveries which are relevant for the quest for the historical Jesus. In *Chapter X*, literary evidence from outside the Gospels is assessed – evidence in pagan, Jewish and Christian writings. *Chapter XI* examines the literary genre of the Gospels, and the criteria which may be used to uncover authentic Jesus traditions from them.

For many readers *Chapters XII, XIII, XIV* and *XV* will be of particular interest. I discuss questions which are easy to pose but difficult to answer: Who was Jesus of Nazareth? What do we know about his life and teaching?

These questions will be considered from unconventional angles. In *Chapter XII* I start with the 'aftermath' of the Jesus movement in the post-Easter period. I argue that the smoke which swirls around in the early years after the crucifixion of Jesus helps us to locate 'the fire' which caused it.

Historians like to look at the records left not only by history's 'winners', but also history's 'losers', the opponents of a prominent individual or movement. Searching for the voices of the opponents of Jesus of Nazareth is rarely attempted, for his followers were not keen to give the opposition a platform. The reader is invited to join the hunt in *Chapter XIII* for the limited number of clues we do have.

In *Chapters XIV* and *XV* I emphasize the importance of evidence which was *embarrassing* to the first followers of Jesus, but which they retained none the less. Not many readers will be aware of the striking similarities between Jesus and John the Baptist. Traditions which put John on a par with Jesus were an embarrassment in the early church. Since they are unlikely to have been invented, they deserve close attention.

In *Chapter XV* I start with the embarrassment of the crucifixion of Jesus and ask why Jesus the prophet from Nazareth was put to death in this most horrendous of all methods of execution.

The final chapter takes up the broader issues which lurk behind many earlier parts of this book. The relationship between historical inquiry and the evangelists' claims about the significance of Jesus is considered. Could the historian's results conceivably either undermine or prove Christian claims about Jesus?



The title of this book, *Gospel Truth?*, is intended to provoke reflection on a set of questions. In the light of recent discoveries and modern scholarship, how much 'truth' do the Gospels contain? Are the evangelists concerned with 'Gospel truth' understood as the *factual reliability* of their stories? Or is their primary interest 'Gospel truth' understood in a very different sense: the *significance* of Jesus as the one who stood in a unique relationship to God as the Messiah-Christ, the Son of God?

The phrase 'Gospel truth', which is used in English today in both senses, has an interesting history. In many contexts today it is used to affirm the truthfulness of a fact or statement. This usage seems to go back no further than the early nineteenth century when the reliability of the written Gospels was contested fiercely. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the phrase referred to the truthfulness of the *content* of the Christian message about Jesus. No doubt this usage was influenced strongly by the use of the phrase 'the truth of the Gospel' in the Authorized Version translation (1611) of Galatians 2:5, 14. In this fiery letter Paul uses this phrase twice to refer to the proclaimed message of good news about the death and resurrection of Christ. In both verses in Galatians the phrase 'the truth of the Gospel' is still found in the New Revised Standard Version (1989) and in the Revised English Bible (1989).

The second half of this book is concerned with the question 'What can the historian say about the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth?' Questions of this kind have been asked only since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The father of modern historical inquiry into the Gospels is H.S. Reimarus. He recognized that by pressing rigorously historical questions he would be perceived to be undermining traditional Christianity's 'Gospel truth', so he decided not to allow his writings to be published in his lifetime. Six years after his death in 1768, the philosopher-

theologian Lessing began to publish extracts from Reimarus's writings anonymously under the title *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*. In 1788 Lessing published his own book about the origin of Matthew and its relationship to Mark and Luke. And so began intensive study of the Gospels which continues to this day.

This was not the first time some of the issues discussed in this book were considered. Martin Luther was well aware of the mistakes and inconsistencies in Scripture. For example, he recognized that Matthew 27:9 mistakenly cited Jeremiah for Zechariah. He knew that there was a serious discrepancy between Matthew and John over the date of the cleansing of the temple: Matthew placed it at end of the ministry of Jesus, John at the beginning. Luther commented as follows:

These are questions that I am not going to try to settle. Some people are so hairsplitting and meticulous that they want to have everything absolutely precise. But if we have the right understanding of Scripture and hold to the true article of our faith that Jesus Christ, God's Son, died and suffered for us, it won't matter much if we cannot answer all the questions put to us.

In other words, Luther concluded that 'Gospel truth' was not undermined by discrepancies. Not all Luther's colleagues took the same line. Andreas Osiander was convinced that proven contradictions would undermine 'Gospel truth', so with great ingenuity he tried to harmonize the apparent discrepancies. This led him to conclude that Jesus must have been crowned with thorns twice, and that Peter must have warmed himself four times in the high priest's courtyard.³

Similar issues were discussed over a thousand years earlier by Origen. This immensely learned and influential third-century church father has a strong claim to be considered the father of serious inquiry into Biblical manuscripts, an inquiry we shall pursue in *Chapters II, III and IV*.

Origen reflected on the reliability and purpose of the Gospels in the face of a stern challenge from the first important pagan opponent of Christianity, Celsus, who wrote between AD 177 and 180. Celsus drew on several strands of Greek philosophical