

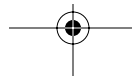
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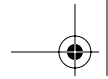
PAPYRI AND PUZZLES

IF YOU WANDERED INTO A PRIVATE ROMAN LIBRARY IN A.D. 33—of which there were many, as it was the height of fashion to have one—you might be surprised to find that it was quite small, even though, likely enough, well furnished and decorated. If you stretched out your arms you might be able to touch both sides of the room. Yet a room this size could house up to 1,700 scrolls—each the equivalent of a small book. The rolls would typically be in cases around the walls, all numbered, with a rectangular case in the middle of the room.

Such manuscript rolls—for, of course, literature at this time was handwritten—comprised sheets made out of papyrus (the source of the English word *paper*), stitched together end on. Unrolled they could be up to as much as about 20 to 40 yards in length. Many of the ancient sources used in writing this book would have had their lengths, or the lengths of their divisions, determined by the physical length of the scrolls used.

As well as many private libraries, there were also large libraries such as the magnificent one at Alexandria, in Egypt, which may have housed as many as 500,000 rolls, or that in Pergamum with about 200,000 rolls. A whole industry surrounded the making of written works. An author might dictate to a group of scribes. A copy might be loaned or hired out to use for further copying by a single scribe or a group, with one person dictating. Even in modern publishing, where the best publishers have stringent methods for checking and double-checking proofs before a text goes to the printers, errors can creep in. In the copying system of first-century publishing, words could be misheard or handwriting misread. Once introduced, errors could be passed on if the faulty copy were used as the basis for further copies, rather like the telephone game or Chinese whispers. It is not surprising that scholars trying to determine meanings of ancient texts, whether Gospels or works by Latin or Greek authors, often find it difficult to gauge the true meaning of some details.

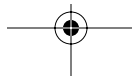
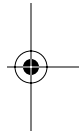


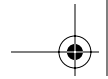


Later in the first century came the remarkable development of the codex, which is far more like our concept of a book. Pages were stitched together and written on, on both sides. It is possible that the technology of the codex was driven by the need of Christian churches throughout the empire to group together their writings. Certainly, by the mid-second century, and perhaps earlier, the four Gospel accounts were collected together—the accounts that became known as the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. One of the earliest fragments of a Gospel from a codex has been dated around A.D. 130, from the Gospel of John. Remarkably, some forty-two papyrus fragments of the Gospels have so far been discovered from codices. T. C. Skeat pointed out the significance of this: “This is an astonishing statistic, if we reflect that among non-Christian papyri the roll form predominated for centuries, and it was not until about A.D. 300 that the codex achieved parity of representation with the scroll, and another two or three centuries passed before the roll disappeared altogether as a vehicle for literature.”¹

Graham Stanton, an eminent British New Testament scholar, agrees with T. C. Skeat’s belief that Christians adopted the codex because it could contain all four Gospels. (The individual Gospels only fit on to a scroll.) This has profound implications for the complex issue of canon (how the early Church decided which texts were authoritative as holy Scripture).

The Gospel accounts, of course, must be an important source for the task of discovering events in A.D. 33. Scholars for several centuries have debated the nature of these accounts. Are they history (in which case, how do we weigh up elements that appear to be historically unlikely, such as miracle-working)? Are they biography (and if so, why are they so different from a modern perception of the genre of biography)? Are they religious texts (and therefore may have a totally different purpose from that of the historian)? Also essential are the Roman histories of Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio Cassius, all of whom write of events of the year A.D. 33 or preceding and subsequent events that are relevant to that year. Tacitus is the most helpful, as his *Annals*, by its nature, recounts events year by year. Then too there are the Jewish histories of Josephus. Other literature of the period casts incidental light on the lives, thinking and beliefs of people throughout the empire. Outside of the Roman and Jewish world, carefully preserved documentation of the era is to be found in China, whose civilization had already flourished for many centuries. In exploring these ancient texts, my overwhelming feeling has been delight in what has survived for us to read, and today is so easy

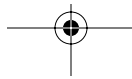
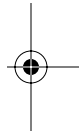


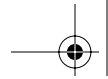


to access through cheap paperbacks and the Internet, but also sorrow at what has been lost to us. My admiration for textual scholars, historians, translators and archaeologists concerned with this period is immense.

In using the four Gospel accounts I have made the same assumption as with employing the three accounts of the emperor Tiberius to be found in the Roman historians Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio Cassius. From these can be built up a picture of events that is reasonably consistent, supplemented by any other available source (e.g., archaeological finds). I have focused on this broad picture rather than on very detailed differences in the accounts, which are really the realm of the textual scholar. This is because my purpose is to try to give a consistent portrait of the events of A.D. 33, in which various strands, particularly Roman and Jewish, interrelate. It is possible to weigh the individual purposes of each Gospel, just as it is to weigh the antipathy of the three Roman historians to the Julio-Claudian period of Tiberius, without dismissing their historicity. The closeness of the accounts to the actual events is of course an important issue. We assume that the Roman historians drew (with varying closeness) on older documents. Many scholars similarly assume that the Gospel writers drew on older sources, or were eyewitnesses or drew upon eyewitness accounts. Some scholars, however, believe that the Gospel accounts are too distant from the events, in the sense that Christian beliefs radically developed and modified the stories of Jesus for them to be accepted at historical face value. They have to be deconstructed to reveal the original Jesus, prior to Christian spin, a Jesus who turns out to be one of several holy teachers whose charisma attracted followings or an eschatological prophet or a wandering philosopher. A problem with these views is that such a figure would hardly set the world alight in the way that Jesus did—the overriding causal element in the rapid expansion of the Christian movement in its first generation was its conviction that Jesus had returned from death and that this authenticated his claim to be the Messiah. The considerable number of scholars who do not put a radically late view on composition suggest a maximum range between the mid-60s (with Mark's Gospel) and the 90s (John's Gospel). Dating of writings of this period is notoriously difficult. The fact that a fragment from John's Gospel exists from a codex dated early second century (Rylands Papyrus 457, dated around A.D. 130) indicates publication well before the date of that codex.

The fact that there are four Gospel accounts has led to intense debate over many generations as to their interrelationship. Though all are indepen-

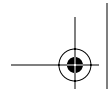




dently authored, with differing purposes, three of them in particular have striking similarities, suggesting that at least two may have used at least one of the others as a partial source. A persuasive theory has posited that a core of lost oral or even written material, mainly comprising segments of Jesus' teaching, was a source the three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) had in common. The content of this core is also the subject of extensive debate. Some scholars argue that similarities between the three can be explained without this core material, called by scholars "Q" (that is, if Luke made use of both Mark's and Matthew's accounts).² The majority view is that Mark's Gospel was written first and that Luke and Matthew made use of Mark and another source (the material called Q) as well as material unique to each (such as accounts of Joseph and Jesus' birth in Matthew). The Fourth Gospel was, in the view of scholars, written independently of the other three and most likely was written last.

As well as literary and source criticism of the Gospels, there has been a great deal of scholarly debate over the dates of their composition. Judgments about this are inevitably swayed by one's views of how close the Gospels bring us to the actual events of Jesus' life and his teaching. If the view is that much of the material is anachronistic, being in fact the expression of later developments in Christian thought, then later dates are posited, as writers who were eyewitnesses or who drew on eyewitness accounts were unlikely to modify the material in this way. Inevitably, therefore, larger questions are involved. One very fruitful line of inquiry is to consider the Gospel accounts in the context of the diversity of Jewish beliefs in the period before A.D. 70, when the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple had such an impact on both Jewish and Christian communities, and when so much was lost to us (see chap. 6). Such inquiry can take into account the Jewish nature of the New Testament writings, in, for example, the letter to the Hebrews or the late-written book of Revelation. There is strong evidence that the church in its first generation was predominantly Jewish. If one considers the Gospels as literary narratives, their affinities are with the Jewish Scriptures rather than with Hellenistic literature. An example of racy narrative by a Latin author is Petronius's *Satyricon*. Although, like the Gospel writers, Petronius includes characters from common life, he has no interest in a distinctive historical context: what he writes is intentionally fiction that is close to the genres of its time, particularly of comedy and satire. The *Satyricon* was probably written around the



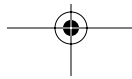
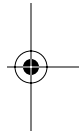


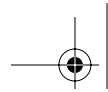
same time as the Gospel of Mark, and so makes a significant comparison.

It is true, however, that the Gospel writers had some knowledge of contemporary Greco-Roman history writing, which affected the structuring of their material rather than its distinctive narrative character. Building on the work of some earlier scholars, Richard A. Burridge has offered a convincing case for genre similarities between the Gospels and contemporary Greco-Roman biography. In his *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, after a detailed examination of the structure of representative biographies by Xenophon, Satyrus, Nepos, Philo, Tacitus, Plutarch and others, he concludes that the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography. Generic features in common with the Gospels include length (between ten thousand and twenty thousand words, fitting a typical scroll of about 10 yards long), absence of a strict chronological sequence in the narrative, and inclusion of selected stories, anecdotes, sayings, and discourses in the middle sections. In content there are also similarities between such contemporary biography and the Gospels. Burridge explains:

They begin with a brief mention of the hero's ancestry, family or city, followed by his birth and an occasional anecdote about his upbringing; usually we move rapidly on to his public debut later in life. Accounts of generals, politicians, or statesmen are much more chronologically ordered when recounting their great deeds and virtues, while lives of philosophers, writers, or thinkers tend to be more anecdotal, arranged around collections of material to display their ideas and teachings. While the author may claim to provide information about his subject, often his underlying aims may include apologetic (to defend the subject's memory against others' attacks), polemic (to attack his rivals) or didactic (to teach his followers about him). Similarly, the gospels concentrate on Jesus' teaching and great deeds to explain the faith of the early Christians. As for the climax, the evangelists devote between 15 and 20 per cent of the gospels to the last week of Jesus' life, his death and the resurrection; similar amounts are given over to their subjects' death in biographies by Plutarch, Tacitus, Nepos and Philostratus, since in this crisis the hero reveals his true character, gives his definitive teaching or does his greatest deed.³

In his *The New Testament and the People of God*, N. T. Wright extends Richard Burridge's conclusions to consider a unique blending of genres in each of the four Gospels. He accepts the genre similarities between Greco-Roman biography and the Gospels. The blending of genres is distinctive in each of the Gospels, but similarities outweigh differences. He builds a strong





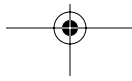
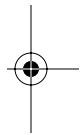
case for each Gospel being a Jewish story intended for a wider Gentile readership. Thus each brilliantly blends a Jewish genre with Hellenistic biography, making their accounts accessible to both Jewish and Gentile readerships. The Jewish genre in itself is superbly accomplished, being an integral whole that includes strongly distinctive elements such as apocalyptic, fulfillment of ancient prophecy and sense of the ending of a millennia-old story, as Jesus fulfils the Old Testament. The emphasis on particular elements, of course, varies from Gospel to Gospel.⁴ On top of their accomplishments in employing the Jewish story, the Gospel writers also brilliantly succeeded in using the Hellenistic genre of biography, in such a way that it would be recognizable by a Greco-Roman readership.

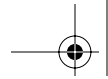
Dr. Wright points out this unique blending of genres, for example, in Luke:

How do these genres—the Jewish story reaching its climax, and the Hellenistic bios, the life-story of a human individual within the Greco-Roman world—fit together? . . . Luke believed that, prior to Jesus, Israel’s story had yet to reach its climax. . . . But at the same time Luke clearly grasped the equally important Jewish belief that when Israel was redeemed the whole world would be blessed. . . . The good news of the established kingdom would have to impinge on the Gentile world. Since, therefore, he believed that this good news had taken the form of the life, and particularly the death and resurrection, of one human being, and since this was a Jewish message for the Gentile world, Luke blended together two apparently incompatible genres with consummate skill. He told the story of Jesus as a Jewish story, indeed as the Jewish story, much as Josephus told the story of the fall of Jerusalem as the climax of Israel’s long and tragic history. But he told it in such a way as to say to his non-Jewish Greco-Roman audience: here, in the life of this one man, is the Jewish message of salvation that you pagans need.⁵

As well as their uniqueness in blending genres, the Gospels are also remarkable from a literary point of view in having a “low-class” setting, even though, of course, their biographical subject is a great man, mockingly dubbed “The King of the Jews” by Pontius Pilate. In this Jewish heritage they anticipate the rise of the realistic novel very many centuries later, and also the related genesis of documentary journalism in Daniel Defoe’s account of the plague year and the recording of ordinary life in diarists such as Samuel Pepys.

Tacitus’s *Annals*, though part of the work has been lost, nevertheless gives an essential account of the year A.D. 33 as part of a portrayal of the





emperor Tiberius. It also recounts preceding events that bear on the year, particularly the rise and fall of Sejanus, Tiberius's deputy. It may have been written around A.D. 115-117. Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars* includes a much more anecdotal and colorful account of Tiberius than is found in Tacitus's measured and concise history. His *Lives* were written later in the second century. The third substantial account we have of Tiberius and events relating to A.D. 33 is found in Dio Cassius's *Roman History*, written in Greek around the end of the second century.

The remaining major history that documents the period is Flavius Josephus's *History of the Jews* (covering Jewish history from ancient times to A.D. 66—the beginning of the Jewish wars—which he leaves to another book). As he was born in A.D. 37, four years after the death of Jesus and the birth of the church, Josephus is the closest to the period after the authors of the Gospels. His work provides many insights into the Jewish world of that time and its key players.

