QUESTION:

I have looked up the content of all the papyri I’m aware of (off of links on wikipedia, so who knows if they’re accurate).

It is my understanding that although p52, p90, and p104 are dated around 125-150 AD, they contain fragments of John 18 and Matt 21 only, and that it’s not until 200 AD that manuscripts emerge which actually contain accounts of supernatural actions by Jesus.

So, it’s possible that accounts of miracles existed in copies that got destroyed, but is it fair to say that the earliest available copies of accounts of Jesus’s supernatural actions date from around 200 AD?

In other words, assuming people on average had kids by age 20 back then, and thus 20 years counts as a generation, is it fair to say that the earliest available accounts of miracles by Jesus were written by the great, great, great, great, great, great, grandson of somebody who would have been alive at the same time as Jesus?

RESPONSE:

This is an interesting question! It is true that we do not start getting relatively complete manuscripts of the Gospels until around the year 200. But I don’t think it would be fair to say that this means that we do not have reports of Jesus’ miracles until then - unless we want to be overly-literalistic in our thinking.

This is why: as I have indicated in other posts, we have far more manuscripts, and early manuscripts, of the New Testament than for any other book from the ancient world. These manuscripts were themselves copied from earlier ones, which were copied from earlier ones, which were copied from earlier ones. That’s a key point.

For the Gospel of Luke – just to pick an example – we have an excellent manuscript, P75, from around 200 CE. It is not a complete manuscript, but a large fragment. It does, however, contain the reports of Jesus’ miracles. Now P75 did not make up these reports itself. It was copying an earlier manuscript (a very good one, from what we can tell).

And as it turns out, we have another manuscript of Luke from about the same time. P45 is also fragmentary, but it also contains the stories of Jesus’ miracles. These two manuscripts are independent of one another, but they contain the same stories, and in most instances in exactly the same words.

Moreover, we have versions (ancient translations of the Greek NT into other languages) that were done in the second century - Coptic, Latin, and Syriac. These also all have the same stories (it’s true that we don’t have second century copies of these versions; but we have enough later copies to make it relatively easy to reconstruct, in most cases, the second-century form of their texts; and NONE of these later copies is lacking any of these miracle stories). And these versions are not only independent of one another, they are independent of the two Greek manuscripts (P45 and P75) from around 200. In addition, we have somewhat later Greek manuscripts that are based on earlier manuscripts that are independent of all the versions and the two Greek manuscripts.
Question on How We Got the Canon of the New Testament
Undergraduate Courses (1): Introduction to the New Testament (Part 1)