

I've had several people ask what I'm working on, now that How Jesus Became God has come and gone from. The answer is: the very next thing! And it's something that I've gotten really excited about, as excited as I was about How Jesus Became God. For some reason, when I was doing that book over the past couple of years, I thought that it was going to be the climax of my trade book publishing career, and that everything would be downhill from there. I was completely wrong about that. I'm now just as passionate about the next project.

I mentioned the book earlier on the blog, before I decided for sure that it was going to be next. But it definitely is. It will be about the oral traditions of Jesus in circulation in the years before the Gospels were written.

So, just to give a bit of background — a review for some of you and new information for probably some others. Scholars have long held that Mark was the first of our Gospels to be written, and that it probably appeared sometime around the year 70 CE. Some scholars think it might have been a bit before that (I used to think that); more scholars think that it might have been a bit after. But almost everyone agrees that Mark dates to around the end of the Jewish War (66-70 CE). The only ones who consistently have argued otherwise are fundamentalists and very conservative evangelicals, who very much want Mark, our earliest Gospel, to be closer to the time of Jesus.

Maybe some time on the blog I'll explain why 70 CE seems like a plausible date. For now, let's just say that this is the virtually consensus view among critical scholars. The last Gospel has traditionally been thought to be John, and it is normally dated to 90 or 95 CE. Matthew and Luke then were probably somewhere between these two (since they used Mark and must date after 70 CE, but seem to be older than John and so must be earlier than 90 CE) - so say 80 or 85 CE.

What is striking, and what I have long emphasized in my writings, is that time gap between the death of Jesus in 30 CE and the first accounts of his life in 70-95 CE. It's a gap (for those who are mathematically challenged) of 40-65 years.

And so the question is, what was happening during all those years to the stories being told about Jesus? The Gospel writers themselves do not claim to have been disciples of Jesus, and do not claim to be eyewitnesses of the events they narrate, and do not claim (contrary to what a lot of people seem to think, largely by not reading the texts in question carefully enough) to have derived their stories directly from eyewitnesses. The Gospels were written anonymously, in different parts of the world from where Jesus lived, in a different language from the one Jesus used, four and more decades after Jesus died. So where did they get their stories?

They got them from oral traditions about Jesus that had been in circulation over all that time, in different languages (at least Aramaic and Greek) in different places in different contexts.

All that is well known, and I've written about it before.

But what I'm interested in now is...

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