

Please Note: Normally I will be addressing questions that I receive in the members only site ("Bart Answers His Readers"). But occasionally I will post a question and answer here, in the Public Forum, to give a sense to everyone what sorts of things are available for anyone willing to give a bit to charity and to join the site.

QUESTION

One of the major points of your work (if I understand correctly) is that the contents of the New Testament are at a vast remove in time, place, and source from any eyewitness account of Jesus' life. But when I consider this point in my ignorance, and simply from the perspective of chronology (from the time of Jesus to the accounts in the earliest gospels), it seems to me that at least one very old eyewitness of Jesus' life might have been able to report a significant amount of information about Jesus and his teachings directly to, say, Mark. In view of this, I wonder how scholars know that no New Testament account of Jesus could have been received directly from any eyewitness.

RESPONSE

It's a very good question, and one that I get asked, in a variety of ways, a lot. My view is this: when Mark was writing his Gospel (the first to be written) in say 65 or 70 CE, there probably were indeed people still living who were familiar with Jesus. At least I would assume that Mark himself thought so. Otherwise it is hard to explain why he included what is now Mark 9:1, where Jesus tells his disciples "Truly I tell you, some of you standing here will not taste death before they see that the Kingdom of God has come in power." If everyone from the first generation had already died, then it seems implausible that Mark would leave a saying of Jesus indicating that the End would come before they all died. (I do not, by the way, think that Mark's Jesus was referring to the day of Pentecost, to the coming of the church, or even to his own Transfiguration, as some interpreters claim, in order to get around the fact that Jesus declared that the end would come before all the disciples died when, in fact, it did not).

But onto my point. Even though there may well have been eyewitnesses alive some 35-40 years after Jesus' death, there is no guarantee - or, I would argue, no reason to think - that any of them were consulted by the authors of the Gospels when writing their accounts. The eyewitnesses would have been Aramaic speaking peasants almost entirely from rural Galilee. Mark was a highly educated, Greek speaking Christian living in an urban area outside of Palestine (Rome?), who never traveled, probably, to Galilee. So the existence of eyewitnesses would not have much if any effect on his Gospel.

The same is true, even more so, with the later Gospels. Luke begins his Gospel by saying that eyewitnesses started passing along the oral traditions he had heard (Luke 1:1-4), but he never indicates that he had ever talked to one. He has simply heard stories that had been around from the days of the eyewitnesses. And if the standard dating of his Gospel - and Matthew's - is correct, they were writing about 50 years or more after Jesus' death. John's Gospel was even later.

My sense is that most of the eyewitnesses (and who knows how many there were?! Hundreds? Probably not. Dozens?) had died before the Gospels were written; those that survived were carrying on their lives in rural Galilee or Jerusalem. And the Gospel writers, who never say they consulted any of them, probably never did consult with any of them. The Gospels are based on oral traditions that had been in circulation - and changed as a result - for decades before the Gospel writers had even heard them.

And as anyone knows who has been subject to oral traditions - this would include all of us - the stories told about a person can change absolutely overnight! It happens all the time. What happens, then, to stories in circulation for 40 or 50 years, in different countries, told in different languages, among people who never laid an eye on an eyewitness or on anyone else who had? My sense is that the stories get changed, often a lot; and many of the stories simply get made up. It's just the way it happens And it can be shown to have happened with the Gospels, since the same story is often told in very different ways. Every historian will tell you: evidence matters!



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