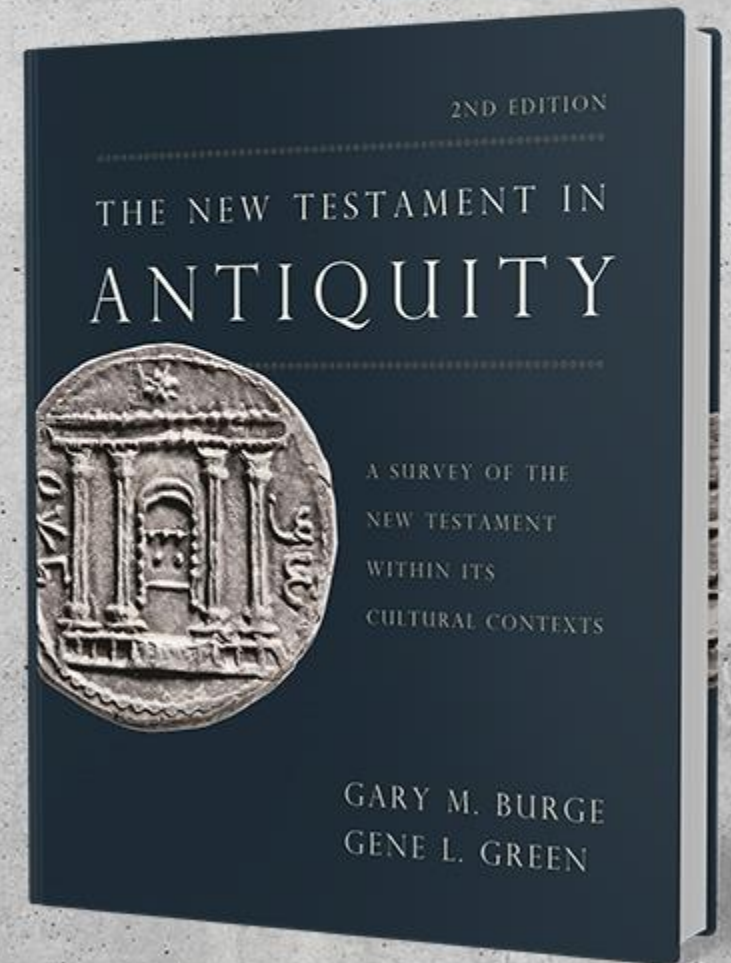


Chapter 5

Sources for the Story of Jesus



Overview

- Jewish and pagan sources attest, albeit briefly, to the person of Jesus.
- The canonical Gospels overwhelmingly provide the bulk of material concerning the life and ministry of Jesus.
- The genre of the Gospels is not a unique phenomenon; rather, it is similar to the Greco-Roman biography, whereby the readers are informed of the protagonist and are to believe that message.
- Concerning literary dependence, the theory of Markan priority is to be preferred. It appears that Mark is the oldest, and both Matthew and Luke often depend on his gospel.
- For a variety of reasons, such as eyewitness testimony, the role of memory, and the function of apostles, we can be confident that the gospels accurately preserve Jesus's teachings and deeds.

SOURCES OUTSIDE THE GOSPELS

Pagan Sources

Nothing from the first-century Roman Empire mentions Jesus.

- Pliny, in the early 2nd century, mentions Christians in a letter to Trajan, but not Jesus.
- Seutonius wrote about riots in Rome involving the Christian community.
- In AD 120, Tacitus describes the early church as a superstitious cult, dangerously antisocial and decidedly irrational. He also mentions that Jesus was executed under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius (*Annals* 15:44).



Jewish Sources

- Early Judaism had a wide body of literature.
 - Some of it may just be responding to Christian writings rather than to Christ.
 - The Babylonian Talmud mentions someone killed on the eve of Passover named “Yeshu,” who was a criminal, magician, and led people astray (*Sanh.* 43a).
- Josephus, the former commander of Galilee, wrote Jewish histories.
 - He does mention Jesus and his followers, but there are likely confessional insertions by Christians who preserved his works.

Second- and Third-Century Christian Sources

- The “apocryphal gospels” are possibly relevant sources.
 - *The Gospel of Peter* (2nd century) is very early, and while scholars are suspicious of any claim that it precedes the canonical Gospels, it is contemporaneous with them.
 - The overtly Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* contains many sayings of Jesus, and scholars debate whether they are authentic or historically reliable.



- The canonical Gospels still offer the most accurate portrait of Jesus.
 - Later works are too suffused with embellishments for Mediterranean audiences.
 - The communication of the early Christian communities was excellent.

THE GOSPELS AS SOURCES FOR JESUS' LIFE

The Genre “Gospel”

- In antiquity, “gospel” (Gk. *evangelion*) was a proclamation rather than a genre.
 - It was announcing the unparalleled “good news” that God had done.
 - Some scholars claim the uniqueness of the message makes the gospels their own genre unseen in the ancient world.
 - While laudable and possible, ancients tended to rely on preexistent forms for communication with the readers/hearers.
- The Gospels are closest to the ancient *Lives* or biographies (Gk. *bioi*).
 - Ancient biographies unveiled a person’s identity not through appealing to psychology but to their words and deeds.

The Literary Criticism of the Gospels

- The parallels between the Synoptic Gospels suggests literary dependence.
 - Bishop Papias (AD 60–130) suggested Mt, Mk, & Lk were written after a “primitive gospel” composed of Matthew’s “oracles” or *logoi* of Jesus in Hebrew.
 - Augustine understood Mt as the first, Mk as an abbreviation, and Lk using both.
- However, the majority of scholars think Mark is the oldest.
 - “Given Mark, it is easy to see why Matthew was written. Given Matthew, it is hard to see why Mark was needed” (G. M. Styler).
 - In many places Mt seems to fill in or make Mk more precise.

- The similarities between Mt and Lk are attributed to Q.
 - This hypothetical “source” (Ger. *Quelle*) may have been a pre-gospel collection of sayings.
 - B. H. Streeter suggested they also used each other in addition to Mk and Q.
- There are other recent theories regarding the Synoptics.
 - W. R. Farmer’s reversal suggests Mt was first and Mk was last.
 - Many other scholars deconstruct these schemata and suggest the process of gospel writing was organic with no strict lines of dependence.
- A new appreciation for John’s gospel is emerging.
 - Traditionally viewed as written late and, thus, historically unreliable
 - Traditionally viewed as a Hellenistic rewriting of the gospel
 - However, there is a new emphasis on John’s reliance on rabbinic thinking, geographic accuracy, and faithfulness to tradition.
 - The best reconstructions take his claim as an eyewitness seriously.

The Historical Criticism of the Gospels

- The mysterious period between Jesus's life and writing the Gospels
 - Karl Schmidt suggested in 1919 there were independent episodes circulating orally in the Christian community.
 - These episodes were linked together by various narrative forms that were usual for communicating messages and preaching in various communities.
 - This is called *form criticism*.
 - The danger with form criticism is that it claims the preservation of the gospel materials came not from their relationship to Jesus, but from the various needs of the Christian community.

The Authenticity of the Gospels

- Many of Jesus's sayings have stylistic forms that could be remembered.
- The apostles were Jews trained in passing down religious truths precisely and reverently.
- The apostles were a stable community who could confirm or correct teaching.
- Memory played a vital role in ancient culture, which was largely oral.
- There were eyewitnesses of Jesus around during the writing the New Testament.
- It is possible that notes were taken during the ministry of Jesus.
- Communities were cautious regarding prophets and avoided discontinuity or innovation.
- The early church carefully distinguishes between its teaching and Jesus's words.
- Jesus's ministry and the early church each had different problems.