The Gospels as Eyewitness Accounts

Are the four Gospels that we have in our NTs reliable means of access to the real Jesus? Are the Gospels history – or legend, or myth, or mere propaganda? Quite a lot of people in the contemporary world, perhaps especially in the media, and even quite a lot of people in the contemporary church have come to think that the four Gospels in our New Testament are basically very unreliable sources for knowing anything much about Jesus. Some people are willing to believe that other Gospels, apocryphal Gospels, such as the Gnostic Gospels, that did not get into our NTs, may be better sources for knowing about Jesus than the four NT Gospels (and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has a lot to do with the popularity of that view).

The form that this scepticism about the NT Gospels often takes is the idea, not that the Gospels are complete fabrications, but that to get at the real Jesus, the Jesus who really lived in first-century Jewish Palestine, we need historians to dig back behind the Gospels, stripping away all kinds of unreliable material, and reconstructing a Jesus who is significantly different from the Jesus the Gospels present to us. In the trade we call that figure the historical Jesus – meaning the Jesus reconstructed by historians. And he is contrasted with the Christ of faith – meaning the Jesus Christians believe in, who is the Jesus Christians find in the Gospels. Very often the idea is to deconstruct the Christ of faith and to reconstruct a rather different so-called Jesus of history.

Are the four Gospels that we have them reliable, or do we have to get behind them, throwing out all the unreliable stuff and deducing what the historical Jesus was really like? The trouble with the search for the historical Jesus enterprise as scholars, let alone other people, have pursued it is the enormous diversity of results. It really doesn't look like we have a sound method for doing that if that is what we have to do.

In my book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* I proposed one way of approaching this issue which I think offers a way beyond that dichotomy between the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus. The key question really is how did the Jesus traditions – the sayings of Jesus, the stories about Jesus – reach the writers of the Gospels? For a century or more scholars have worked with a particular model of how this happened, and it was a model that could well suggest, depending on which scholar was using it, that the Gospels as we have them are pretty unreliable means of access to the real Jesus. You need to understand that model if you want to understand the roots of scepticism about the Gospels as history among many scholars. My book essentially proposes a new model. I called the book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* because my model very much focuses on the role of the eyewitnesses, those who were actually there at the events of Jesus' history. The question: how did the Jesus traditions reach the writers of the Gospels? has a lot to do with the eyewitnesses. We could rephrase the question: how are the Gospels related to the testimony of the eyewitnesses?

(1) How did Jesus traditions reach the Gospel writers?

We need to take a look at what I call the three paradigms, and in describing them very briefly I'm going to focus especially on the role the eyewitnesses played in them.

The traditional paradigm is the one that was held in the Christian churches, mostly without question, down to the nineteenth century. It takes at face value the titles of the Gospels – according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – regarding those persons, all identified either as apostles or as disciples of apostles, as the authors of the Gospels, which means that two of the Gospel writers were themselves eyewitnesses, while the other two had good access to eyewitness tradition. Let me mention in particular the traditional view of Mark's Gospel because I'm going to focus especially on Mark in this lecture. This goes back to Papias, who was bishop of Hierapolis at the beginning of the second century, and wrote a book that survives for us only in a few fragments. But those fragments include the earliest statements about the origins of the Gospels outside the Gospels themselves. About Mark he said that Mark acted as Peter's interpreter and that he wrote the Gospel on the basis of Peter's teaching. Papias was in a good position to know something about the origins of Mark's Gospel and most scholars in the 19th century took Papias's testimony very seriously. But that was before the modern paradigm came along at the beginning of the 20th century.

The modern paradigm derives from a group of scholars in the early twentieth century who are known as the form critics. They allowed the eyewitnesses a role only at the beginning. That is, they were no doubt the first to tell stories about Jesus and to repeat his sayings, but from then onwards the oral traditions about Jesus had a life of their own, with which the eyewitnesses had nothing more to do. The traditions were passed on orally in the early Christian communities, the form critics claimed, as anonymous community traditions. In other words, no one said: this story I'm telling comes from Peter, or from James or whatever. The traditions were owned and shaped by the communities. And it was only as anonymous community traditions that they reached the Gospel writers. In the view of many scholars, though not all, the Christian communities handled the traditions very creatively, because they were not interested in history but only in their relationship with Jesus as presently living Lord.

Someone once said that if the form critics were right, the eyewitnesses must have ascended to heaven almost as soon as Jesus did. My book tries to work through the implications of supposing that they did not. Of course, for a long time the eyewitnesses were not only still alive but in touch with the Christian communities. The major eyewitnesses were very well known. They would have been remained throughout their lifetimes the accessible sources and authoritative guarantors of the traditions they themselves had formulated at the beginning. In view the eyewitnesses were either the immediate sources of the Gospels or not far behind the texts of the Gospels as we have them. The Gospels are substantially eyewitness testimony about Jesus.

That may sound like a return to something quite like the traditional view, and I don't mind saying it is. But the key difference lies in the arguments used for such

a view. The old paradigm didn't really go in much for arguments. For example, it accepted the views of the early church Fathers because it was generally felt that they must have known what they were talking about. To take the case of Papias on Mark's Gospel, it would certainly seem that Papias is a good, early witness to this Gospel's connexion with Peter. But the modern paradigm dismissed Papias on the grounds that what Papias said does not accord with the nature of the contents of the Gospel. If it comes to choice between what we can tell from the content of the Gospel itself and what someone else, at however early in church history, claimed, we have to go with the former. What I want to show you is that, if we look again at some key features of Mark's Gospel itself, we shall actually find strong reasons for associating it with Peter. Against the form critics, I would say, the evidence of the Gospel itself accords very well with what Papias said.

(2) Identifying eyewitnesses in the Gospels

Do the Gospels themselves indicate that they were based on eyewitness testimony? This is really the central question I tackled in the book: Do the *Gospels themselves* indicate that they were based on eyewitness testimony? Something scholars often say in support of the modern paradigm is that the Gospels do *not claim* to be based on eyewitness testimony. On this view the titles of the Gospels are not original and so, for example, the title of Matthew's Gospel is a not a claim by the writer of the Gospel itself to derive in anyway from the apostle Matthew. But, even leaving aside the titles, two of the Gospels do, on the face of it, claim to be closely related to eyewitness testimony. Luke's Gospel is the only one that has a preface, the sort of preface historians in the ancient world wrote, in which the author tells us about his sources. The author says he received his traditions 'from those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning.' Even more striking, the Gospel of John claims in its closing words to have been actually written by a disciple of Jesus. Scholars working with the old paradigm do not take these apparent claims seriously, for a number of reasons, including the fact that if we take them in their most obvious sense they are incompatible with the old paradigm. I think we should take those claims at face value, but I'm going to focus this lecture especially on the Gospel of Mark, partly because I agree with most scholars that Mark's is the oldest of the 4 Gospels and because modern readers do not readily find in it any indications that it is closely based on eyewitness testimony. What I want to argue is that, for its first readers (or hearers), Mark's Gospel actually would have given quite strong indications of who its eyewitness sources were.

It's important to begin with reader expectations. What readers expect of what they read has a lot to do with literary genre. It makes a big difference to how you read a book whether you think it is a novel or a work of history or a collection of short stories or a travel guide or whatever. One very significant advance in Gospels scholarship fairly recently is that probably a majority of scholars now agree that the genre to which the first readers of the Gospels would most readily have thought they belonged was the ancient genre of biography, the life of a great man. Since they also knew that the Gospels narrated events that occurred within living memory, they would have expected the Gospels to be the sort of biography that was fairly close to the methods of historiography in the literature

of the time. The ancients had strong opinions about how history should be written. It must be based on eyewitness testimony. The good historian should either have been an eyewitness himself or he should have met and interviewed people who were eyewitnesses. Good historical writing should incorporate the accounts of eyewitnesses at first or secondhand. This is why the ancients thought that real history had to be contemporary history, written when eyewitnesses were still available. Their approach to history was quite like what he call oral history.

This means, I think, that readers of the Gospels would expect these writings to embody eyewitness testimony and they would be alert to indications of who the eyewitnesses were. They might well notice indications of this kin d that we do not because we aren't looking for them or don't know what sort of indications we should be looking for.

(3) **Peter and the Women in the Gospel of Mark**

Before answering that question about how the eyewitnesses are identified, I need to point out to you what seems to have been a principle of eyewitness testimony to Jesus in the early church. This is the principle of eyewitness testimony 'from the beginning' – that key phrase meaning from the beginning of Jesus onwards, right through to the resurrection appearances. A major eyewitness was someone who had been with Jesus all the way through. We find that principle in the narrative at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, where the number of the Twelve apostles needs to be made up again after Judas's defection and death. We find that the criterion for being one of the Twelve is that such a person had to be someone who had been with Jesus from the beginning. One such person is elected to succeed Judas, but there were evidently other disciples of Jesus who fulfilled that criterion. All too often people imagine the Twelve apostles were the only disciples Jesus had. No, Jesus had a much larger number of disciples, some of whom at least were disciples from an early stage of Jesus' ministry and stuck with him through to the end. So the Twelve were the best known of those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning, but there were others too. So when Luke in the preface to his Gospels, says he received the traditions about Jesus from people who were eyewitnesses from the beginning, he could be referring to members of the Twelve but he could also be referring to other personal disciples of Jesus. Finally, that same phrase 'witnessing from the beginning' turns up in John's Gospel too, so we can be pretty sure that this was a standard idea in the early church: the most important eyewitnesses were those who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry.

So now let's imagine one of the early readers (or hearers) of Mark's Gospel, armed with this principle, looking out for indications of who might be the key eyewitness or eyewitnesses behind Mark's Gospel. Very soon such a person would hear of the beginning of Jesus' ministry and then of Jesus' call of the first disciples. The first disciple of all, the first one to be mentioned in the Gospel is the fisherman Simon, who later comes to be called also Peter. Moreover, Mark lays special emphasis on Simon by repeating his name: he says 'Simon and Simon's brother Andrew.' He could have said, it would have been more natural to

say: 'Simon and his brother Andrew' but he repeats the name Simon for emphasis. So Simon is the first disciple to be named in Mark, and he is also the character who appears in the Gospel narrative much the most frequently (apart from Jesus himself). Add to that the fact that Peter is also the last disciple to be named, in fact the last name to appear at all in Mark's Gospel.

This pattern – first and last to be named, with many appearances in between those two endpoints – forms, I think, a pattern of reference to Peter that marks him out as the character in the Gospel from whom Mark received the bulk of the traditions about Jesus he records. Let me add another feature of Mark's narrative that I think confirms that. Peter is present at almost all of the events narrated in the Gospel up until the story of his threefold denial of Jesus, which occurs during Jesus' trial before the high priest. But he is not present for the rest of the Gospel's narrative. Nor are any of the Twelve apostles present: they had all fled when Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane. All Jesus' male disciples fail him at the end. None of them are there when Jesus is crucified. Yet the events of Jesus' crucifixion, his burial in the tomb, and then the finding of the tomb empty on Easter Sunday morning (the first sign of his resurrection) – this sequence of events is probably, for Christian faith, the most important part of the Gospel. If anything in the Gospel needed to be soundly based on eyewitness testimony, surely these events did.

Mark does indeed adduce eyewitnesses for these events that none of the Twelve disciples, and certainly not Peter, witnessed. For the first time in his Gospel Mark introduces the women disciples of Jesus, naming three of them. These three – Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome – are present looking on as Jesus is crucified and dies. Two of the three – Mary Magdalene and the other Mary – he tells us are present when Jesus was buried, observing where he was buried. Then all three of these named women appear again, coming to the tomb and finding it empty. Moreover, in his references to these women Mark is constantly saying that they *saw* and observed. He could hardly have piled up more instances of verbs of seeing. The women do hardly anything else except watch and observe. Mark is telling us very clearly that these women disciples are the eyewitnesses from whom this narrative of events at which Peter, his principal eyewitness source, was not present.

So the role of the women in Mark's narrative not only shows that they were key eyewitnesses themselves on whose testimony Mark drew (perhaps via Peter), but it also supports the view that Mark's principal eyewitness in the rest of the Gospel narrative was Peter. So I think we can say quite confidently that the evidence of this Gospel itself bears out Papias's claim. Mark's Gospel actually claims, in subtle features of the way it is written, to rest on Peter's eyewitness testimony for the most part, supplemented by some others, especially the three women disciples.

You can read all that in more detail in the book – and a lot of further discussion of Papias, oral tradition in the early church, the eyewitness character of John's Gospel. I'm not even going to try to summarize any of those other parts of the

book. Instead I want now to share with you some material that is not in the book. This is fresh work I've been doing this summer, not yet published in any form.

At this point we're moving on from what the Gospel of Mark actually claims about its eyewitness sources – and I kept firmly to that issue in the book. What we're now looking at is an aspect of Mark's Gospel which makes, I think, the claim that is based on Peter's testimony very credible. For this we need to look rather closely at the geographical aspect of Mark's narrative.

(4) Mark's Galilean Topography

As you know, much of Mark's Gospel is set in Galilee, but scholars have often thought Mark's Galilean topography so inaccurate that it cannot go back to someone who actually knew Galilee. What I want to show you, to the contrary, is that it actually makes very good sense if we read it from the perspective of a Capernaum fisherman.

Apart from Nazareth, all the places in Galilee and the Golan that Mark's Gospel names are located around the northern shore of the lake: Capernaum, Bethsaida, 'the country of the Gergesenes', Gennesaret and 'the district of Dalmanutha.' The fact that the last is mentioned nowhere else is best taken as an indication of local knowledge of a particularly insignificant location. All these places are located around the lake north of a line drawn between Magdala and Gergesa. There is also a reference to 'the region of the Decapolis,' a vague reference to the land that lay beyond the lake from Gergesa southwards. Galilean places not around the lake and visited by Jesus are named only in other Gospels: Chorazin, Cana, Nain. Mark tells us that Jesus travelled throughout Galilee but almost every actual event that he narrates for eight chapters of his Gospel occurs near or even on the lake.

We hear little about the journeys as such except when they are by boat across the lake. These journeys, of which there are no less than six in Mark's Gospel and which in many cases are said to be from one to 'the other side', can be confusing to readers or scholars who try to visualize them according to a modern map and suppose that one side of the lake must be the western side and the other side the eastern. But Capernaum fishermen had never seen a map. They envisaged the lake in terms of the journeys they made in the course of their daily work. For them one 'side' of the lake was the coast from Bethsaida to Gennesaret, a stretch of coast in which Capernaum was roughly central. This was 'their side' of the lake. The 'other side' stretched from the coast east of Bethsaida southwards to Gergesa and beyond. The area from Bethsaida to Gergesa was sparsely inhabited: hence in the Gospel it so often supplies a 'deserted place' to which Jesus and the disciples retreat from the much more populated north-west shore (their side). Moreover, at least from Gergesa southwards the inhabitants were predominantly Gentile. Capernaum fishermen would not usually have had occasion to go ashore on that 'side' of the lake, but they would have gone to that area of the lake because it was the best area for catching Galilean sardines, a catch that must have been important to them especially in the off season. Along that sparsely populated coast they would not have been in competition with local fishermen.

This is very much a Capernaum *fisherman's* world, the world of someone who knew the lake and the surrounding land as *the shore of the lake*. It is a different world even from that of, for example, other inhabitants of Capernaum who farmed the famously fertile soil of Capernaum's hinterland. Of course, the Capernaum fishers who became members of Jesus' selected Twelve travelled with him throughout Galilee and far outside. But it is intelligible that the locations they remembered best were those with which they were already very familiar. Until they travelled elsewhere with Jesus, the northern part of the lake of Galilee – the lake itself with its shore – was probably the only world they knew, unless they sometimes went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

When Jesus and the disciples travel out of Galilee in this Gospel place names are few and rather generalizing ('the region of Tyre,' 'the villages of Caesarea Philippi,' 'the region of Judaea and beyond the Jordan'). Only in the vicinity of Jerusalem do we find some very specific places named (Jericho, Bethphage, Bethany, the Mount of Olives, Gethsemane, Golgotha). Intimate disciples of Jesus had particularly good reason to remember these places. The topography of Jerusalem and the particular places to which Peter went with Jesus (and the one to which Peter did not go: Golgotha) will have been etched on Peter's memory probably more other places to which he had travelled with Jesus. But we should also note that if the author of Mark's Gospel was John Mark of Jerusalem, as I think there is good reason to suppose, then in this latter part of his narrative Mark's own intimate knowledge of Jerusalem could have come into play.

(5) **Testimony as a historical and theological category**

Finally, lets take a brief look at the notion of testimony. I've suggested that the Gospels are closely based on the evidence of the eyewitnesses. But what is the status of their testimony. What kind of evidence is testimony?

The first point I want to make is that the Gospels are not based on what detached observers of the events said, but on what participants in the events remembered and recounted. One modern response to that could be to say that then it's very subjective, isn't it? Wouldn't it be much better to hear the evidence of uninvolved observers. Well, ancient historians certainly did not think so. What they valued was the testimony of eyewitness participants in the events, people who could speak of the events, as it were, from the inside. Moreover, this is what oral historians today are after: they want to know what it was like for people involved in the events. The detached observer often doesn't remember much anyway, while there's a lot that we simply could not know about historical events except from insiders.

Such insiders are, of course, people who were affected by the events. In the case of the events narrated in the Gospels, for those who told the stories they were life-changing events. They were the sort of stories they felt impelled to tell. For them they were highly significant events and of course they wanted to convey the significance to others when they told their stories. In the book I use as a kind of parallel the modern example of testimony by survivors of the Holocaust.

Insider testimony in that case is absolutely essential if we're to have any sense of the horrendous nature of what went on. So, in a different way, in the case of the Gospel events.

Testimony of this kind is inescapably a blend of fact and interpretation. The interpretation is not something the witnesses have added on artificially afterwards. Events are already interpreted as he remember them, and really significant events are often memories we ponder over the years as we tell and re-tell them, quite possibly seeing new levels of significance in the process.

Of course, the Gospels are a mixture of remembered fact and remembering interpretation. But all history that is of any interest at all is a blend of fact and interpretation. We can't have bare facts. And the events of the Gospels were, if the witnesses are to be believed, history-making events, in which God himself was disclosed in an exceptional way. Testimony from participant eyewitnesses is exactly what we need if we are to have access to the real Jesus of Christian faith.

Finally, testimony is both a historical category and a theological category. If we read the Gospels as testimony we take them seriously as the sort of historical literature they are, we acknowledge the uniqueness of what we can only know in this testimonial form. That's the sort of history they are, but at the same time we can now recognize that testimony is the appropriate category with which to read the Gospels in faith and for theology. These eyewitness testimonies speak to us from the inside of the events, experienced by those who recognized the disclosure of God in them. They give us not the tired old dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, but the Jesus of testimony.