

# How do we know the New Testament is True?

## Epiphanies From a Lifetime, Part 1

By Paul Barnett    Published in the Lent and Easter editions of [The Anglican Planet](#)



**The entire ministry of Jesus is embedded in places we can still visit, such as the city of Nazareth.**

(Photo: DAPHNA TAL / [www.goisrael.com](http://www.goisrael.com))

FOR THEOLOGY TO BE TRUE depends on what happened historically. If the Word did not actually become flesh in Bethlehem in the latter years of Herod, then the theology stated in John 1:14 “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,” is just empty words, akin to myth. F.F. Bruce saw no incompatibility between theology and history and observed that ‘a man cannot be a good theologian unless he is a good historian.’ [1]

I intend to dwell on my personal discoveries over the 55 years of my Christian journey. Discovery is not the right word because it puts the emphasis on me. Epiphanies would be better because these discoveries are really revelations from God, God-given insights. ‘Flesh and blood’ does not discover truth about God; God must reveal it.

The **first epiphany** happened in a class in Ancient History 101. I was 29 years old. Six years earlier I had been converted out of a totally unchurched background. My experience was pretty dramatic, but I was wary of emotionalism and kept asking my new church friends, 'How do we know it's true?' to which they replied, 'It just is. Just believe it.' But the question remained.

The epiphany happened when I suddenly realized how good were the historical sources for Jesus and the birth of Christianity. We had been studying Alexander the Great and the Roman Caesars. For Tiberius, the Caesar in whose time Jesus ministered, we mainly depend on Suetonius for information. But Suetonius wrote about eighty years after Tiberius' death, when no one was alive who could question what had been written. Mark wrote his Gospel only 30 or so years after Jesus, when many of Jesus' contemporaries were still alive.

I already knew that the 27 books of the New Testament were written by ten mostly independent authors, and were in circulation and use by the mid-90s – less than 60 years after Jesus; most of them much closer to Jesus, especially the epistles. As well, I knew by then that these early texts had been accurately transmitted and copied from the time they were written. I knew there are 5,600 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament from the early centuries and 19,000 translations in Latin, Coptic, Arabic, and Armenian – more than 24,000 in all. Cross checking by textual critics means that the texts in our Bibles are 99% certain, and nothing doctrinal hangs on the 1%.

I cannot tell you how excited I was in that lecture room. It was a 'eureka' moment. The witness of the New Testament to Jesus more than holds its own relative to the documentation of the Caesars of those times, whose life stories are not in doubt.

Also connected with my first epiphany was a little book by A.M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors*, which pointed out that Paul did not write the words we find in 1 Cor. 15:3-7. That's where he quotes that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised the third day, and appeared on 5 separate occasions to more than 500 people. Paul was quoting what he had been taught at or soon after his conversion, that is, only about one or at most four years after Jesus. In other words, the idea that Jesus was the Messiah, who died for sins and who was resurrected on the third day, did not evolve decades later than Jesus but was part of Christian understanding from the beginning, in the immediate aftermath of his lifespan. Why would the earliest Christians in Jerusalem have formulated this teaching, if it weren't true?

By now I was hooked on history and found myself researching a post-graduate thesis on first century Jewish history. My topic was 'Civil Disturbances in Judea in the First Century.' Did you know that three civil wars broke out when Herod died in 4 BC, led by Judas in Galilee, Simon in Perea and Athronges in Judea? Each of these claimed to be a king and it took the might of the Roman army from Syria to put

down these revolts. Then there were violent Pharisees like Saddok in AD 6, a prophet like Theudas who was killed in 46 and patriots like Menahem who marched into Jerusalem in 66. These were formidable figures with big followings who spanned the era of the New Testament.

So why are these men who fill the pages of Josephus forgotten today and Jesus is a household word? It's because history is full of people who blaze briefly like comets and are then forgotten. But Jesus claimed to be the Son of Man who forgave sins, who healed the sick and raised the dead, who entered Jerusalem as its Messiah-king, whose teaching on love and forgiveness was profound and unheard of, and who himself was resurrected from the dead. Without the resurrection Jesus would have been just another mistaken prophet whose death guaranteed his relegation to obscurity, like the shadowy figure of the Teacher of Righteousness, the founder of the Dead Sea Sect, whose name we do not even know.

While in my 30s, I began my visits to Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Greece, which I still continue on an annual basis. I am privileged to have visited every place mentioned in the New Testament, with one important exception – Tarsus, birthplace of Paul. That was to have been in 2011, but for the civil war in Syria.

A **second epiphany** – in my forties – was based on my first visit to Israel and Jordan – and confirmed many times since. The towns of the Holy Land have been mostly continuously settled in the years since, with place names unchanged. The geography of Galilee and the topography and streetscape of Jerusalem cohere amazingly with the biblical text. The entire ministry of Jesus is embedded in places we can still visit.

The context of John's ministry and Jesus' ministry is stated by Luke (3:1-2) – the fifteenth year of Tiberius (AD 28 or 29) when Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod Antipas tetrarch of Galilee, Annas and Caiaphas high priests – and links in exactly to the complex jurisdictions of the holy land after the death of Herod and Augustus' division of Herod's kingdom.

In Luke-Acts [both books are written by Luke] there are no less than sixteen texts that connect Luke's narrative with famous named people in world history, like Sergius Paulus Proconsul of Cyprus, to take one example. Then there are dozens of lesser figures like the centurion Cornelius in Caesarea Maritima who are no less authentic. In other words, the geography, topography and history of the New Testament coheres with the geography and history of the era in which it is located. This is the more impressive because such references are made in passing, matters of incidental detail, easily missed because of the weightiness of the narrative.

Luke-Acts is an amazing text covering 70 years from the birth of John the Baptist to Paul's imprisonment in Rome and represents 25% of the volume of the New Testament. It is widely commended by great secular historians like Mommsen, Meyer and Sherwin-White, but surprisingly spurned by many specialist Christian scholars. John Crossan's index to his *Birth of Christianity*, for example, does not have a single reference to the book of Acts and declares the first thirty years of Christian history to be 'dark decades...cloaked in silence.' That is a convenient viewpoint if you want to write your own history of Christianity and present your own revisionist, designer theology! Luke-Acts is critical to recovering Christian origins, the beginnings of Christianity. Only this continuous text connects the rise of early Christianity to the power of Jesus, his identity, his saving death and his glorious resurrection.

As Luke tells us in his opening words, it was the original disciples of Jesus who handed over textual sources to Luke for him to write his great global history. Who was better placed than them to do so? The 'we' and 'us' passages in Acts 21-28 tell us that Luke was with Paul for the last five years of the narrative of Luke-Acts. Luke was Paul's companion and therefore well placed to write about Paul. Who else but Paul could have given Luke the material he uses about Paul, his early life, his persecutions, his conversion, and his remarkable missions in Syria-Cilicia, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia? Luke-Acts shows us the immediate continuity between Jesus, crucified and risen, and the first three decades of Christianity. The apostles preached Jesus as the risen Christ and Lord, because he was!

The archaeologist's spade, as well as accidental discoveries, has confirmed much of the data we encounter in the biblical texts:

- Jacob's well near Joseph's tomb under the shadow of Mount Gerizim
- a pool near the Sheep Gate, known as Bethesda
- the discovery of rolling stones to seal tombs
- an inscription bearing the name Pontius Pilate, discovered in 1961
- the tragic remains of the crucified man, Yehohanan, discovered in 1968
- a fishing boat from this period, discovered in 1985
- a burial chest inscribed Joseph Caiaphas, discovered in 1990
- the Pool of Siloam, identified in 2004

All these subtly but cumulatively reinforce the sense that we are in the realm of historical and geographical reality when we read the Gospels.

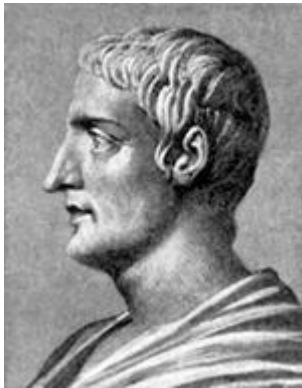
So far I have shared some 'eureka' moments:

- The quality and quantity of the sources for Jesus, and their closeness to him.
- The early, oral formulation of words embedded in 1 Cor. 15:3-7 about Christ's death for sin, his burial, his resurrection on the 3rd day, and his multiple appearances.
- The linkages from Luke-Acts into world history, pointing to Luke's integrity.
- Based on numerous visits to Israel the amazing coherence of geography, topography, and history, supported by archaeological finds and discoveries.

Each of these has confirmed my strong confidence in the integrity of the New Testament texts in their witness to Jesus, the Son of God, who performed inexplicable miracles, who proclaimed the kingdom of God, who was the friend of sinners, who trained his disciples for world mission, who died on the cross as our sin-bearer, and whom God raised from the dead to give us the hope that God has triumphed over evil and will triumph over evil – and who established the church. I have absolutely no doubts about the authenticity and historicity of the New Testament.

One thing is certain. No mere prophet or holy rabbi could have been the impetus for the amazing movement that arose in his immediate aftermath, as reflected in the New Testament in general and Luke-Acts in particular. As I have mentioned, there were many warlords, prophets, and charismatic rabbis in Palestine in the first century, but they are lost in the dust of time. It is only the deity of Jesus, his gracious miracles, his profound love ethic and his resurrection from the dead that explain not merely the survival of faith in him, but the immediate explosion of that faith and its rapid dissemination around the Mediterranean world. Jesus gave hope to a hopeless world, and – thank God – he still does. **TAP**

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From top: Josephus, Tacitus and Pliny. Although these writers were opposed to the Christians, their accounts of the raw facts about Christian origins and practice exactly correspond with the raw facts in the New Testament.

Epiphanies From a Lifetime, Part 2

**By Paul Barnett**

LET ME SHARE three other epiphanies.

The **third** was when I was lecturing at university. I decided to make a detailed comparison of the accounts of a miracle that each of the four Gospels narrate. I chose the miracle of the loaves and fishes. As I spread out the four Greek texts in parallel, I was quickly reminded that Matthew and Luke make use of Mark's account, often word for word. Matthew and Luke are derivative texts, based mainly on Mark. Most scholars accept that Mark's is the earliest of the three, and that Matthew and Luke also incorporate other sources in their idiosyncratic Gospels making them both longer than Mark's. John, however, does not replicate any words from the other three, except for the statistics – 5000 men, five loaves, two fishes, twelve baskets, etc.

But there are other differences. In John they are barley loaves and pickled fish that belong to the boy, details found only in John. And his story line is a little different: in John, Jesus welcomes the crowd but in Mark he arrives after them. Clearly Mark did not depend on John or John on Mark. At a secular university with mostly secular students with no church background I set an essay question about this incident in the four gospels. The universal opinion was that Mark and John were primary, independent sources. That means there are two independent witnesses to this miracle.

I was reminded of '**Momigliano's Rule**': '**historical research is based on the distinction between original and derivative authorities.**' Professor Momigliano of Cambridge is one of the doyens of ancient history studies.

So what we have are two core texts – Mark's and John's – that are independent of each other. Each is the final, written up version of a tradition – written or oral – that went back to the event, and that separately testifies to the truth of the event, the great miracle. This criterion is called '**Multiple Attestation**, and it is fundamental to all historical enquiry but no less to the jury process. One witness may inspire confidence, but two or more – if credible – make for a weighty case. But a second witness who merely repeats a primary witness is no use at all, according to Momigliano's wise counsel.

There are thirty-seven separate miracles of Jesus in the four Gospels. These fall into four categories – exorcisms, nature miracles, healings and raisings up from the dead. These are found in the independent Mark and John and in the three independent sources underlying Matthew and Luke, known as Q (common to Matthew and Luke), L (unique to Luke), and M (unique to Matthew). The thing is, each of these miracle types is found in at least two independent sources, of which the Miracle of the Loaves and the Fishes is a case in point. Based on the principle of Multiple Attestation a historian would rightly conclude that these four miracle types – exorcisms, nature miracles, healings and raisings up from the dead – actually happened at the hands of Jesus, testifying to Jesus' unique deity.

This is a matter of history, based on the historical method. It is not mere unsubstantiated dogma.

My **fourth epiphany** occurred while I was giving a talk on a university campus about the reliability of the New Testament and a questioner asked me about the Qur'an. I had to admit that I didn't know enough to respond. So I set about reading the Qur'an and thinking about the question.

I do not doubt that Muhammad was a real person, with a huge impact, and that the Qur'an reflects the oracles he believed God spoke to him. But when I read the text, I was struck by an absence of linkages into world history and local geography that we find in the Gospels, Acts and Letters. There are no people like Jairus, no places like Capernaum, no references like, 'the next day' that tie down the narratives about Jesus to other people, real places and actual times. What we find in the Qur'an is mainly 'teaching' that is not anchored into times, places or people within the Prophet's life span 570-632. The earliest extant biography of the Prophet, written by Ibn Hisham 213 years after Muhammad's death has some of these details, but not the Holy Qur'an. In this regard the New Testament is another world. The letters of the New Testament – even the Revelation – are full of personal, historical and geographical information.

Also to my knowledge there are no external contemporary texts that shed light on the Prophet or the early years of Islam. Early Christianity is different. Josephus, writing mid-90s from Rome, reports that Jesus was a 'wise man' whose tribe still continued sixty years later. Tacitus writing ca. 110 observes that the 'Christians' took their name from Christus whom Pilate executed in Judea, but whose movement did not die with its founder. Rather, it spread to Rome where it became an 'immense multitude', and a convenient scapegoat for Nero after the great fire in 64.

Also writing about 110 was Pliny, governor of Bithynia a Black Sea province, who said that the Christians' practice was to meet weekly to sing hymns to Christ, 'as to a god'. This is a striking detail that confirms the witness of the New Testament that the early Christians met, worshipped and prayed to the exalted Jesus.... Pliny confirms the witness of the New Testament that the early Christians met to worship Jesus as Lord.

It is striking that Josephus, Tacitus and Pliny strongly dislike Christianity and the Christians. Tacitus and Pliny describe Christianity as a spreading disease. Tacitus said the Christians pursued 'vile practices' and Pliny implies that they were fanatics.

Although these writers are opposed to the Christians, their accounts of the raw facts about Christian origins and practice exactly correspond with the raw facts in the New Testament. Their interpretations of Jesus and the Christians are diametrically opposed, but the facts corroborate one another. These are unbiased, even hostile witnesses, yet they confirm the accounts written from inside the movement. This is not merely Multiple Attestation, but **Multiple Hostile Attestation** that neatly dovetails with the narrative of the New Testament.



Now to my final **fifth epiphany**, which occurred in the mid-1990s. I stumbled across a book called *The Practice of History* by Geoffrey Elton, a distinguished scholar of Tudor history. Elton made a distinction between **‘evidence...intended for publication’ and incidental information produced for ‘another purpose’**.

I immediately thought the Gospels and Acts belonged to the first category of ‘evidence...intended for publication’ whereas the Letters were produced ‘for another purpose’, that is, informal, even trivial documents relating to the passing, sometimes mundane needs of the recipient churches. Elton shrewdly observed that those who wrote histories – documents intentionally written for publication – were open to suspicion regarding their motives to whitewash their subjects whereas surviving trivia like invoices and laundry lists were not, and were often full of useful information about the economy of the times, for example.

I thought, ‘How important, therefore, are the New Testament epistles. They have not been written as chronicles or histories to convince somebody, yet they contain lots of historical and chronological information. This is especially true of Galatians, First and Second Corinthians, Romans and Philippians. At so many points these texts ‘written for another purpose’ – the often trivial problems in the churches, and not originally intended for wider publication – confirm the details in the intentionally written Gospels and Acts. For me this was an important discovery and it became a chapter in a book, *Jesus and the Logic of History* published in 1997.

There is more, but ... history is not for everyone! But I am encouraged in my confidence in the witness of the New Testament to Jesus, Son of God, Lord, and Saviour. The creeds we confess in church arise out of the New Testament and the multiplicity of its sources and the integrity of its transmission undergird its trustworthiness.

I could not reject the historical reliability of the New Testament, even if I wanted to. **TAP**

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