

# Panel Discussion

**Hershel Shanks:** A couple of questions have been raised to me by people in the audience, and I am going to pass them on as the first questions from the audience.

One of the requests was that we give more dates. We talked a lot about Mark and the date of Mark's Gospel, around the time of the First Jewish Revolt (66–70 C.E.). But what about Matthew and Luke? And in what circumstances were they composed?

**John Dominic Crossan:** It is important that you understand the difference between dating when a manuscript was copied and dating when the contents were composed. You can say, more or less objectively, that this manuscript was written in the year 200. And that's about when you get a first copy of Matthew and Luke. That's objective. If you ask when the text was first composed, not this copy, but when the original content was composed, where it was composed, by whom, that all has to be interpreted from within the text. And therefore it is open to debate. For example, 85 is the standard date, around 85 for Matthew. Where? Well, everyone says Antioch. Antioch must have been crowded with people writing Christian documents. I mean, we're always looking for big cities. We're looking for Rome, Antioch, Alexandria.

**Marcus J. Borg:** I have nothing to add to that except that Luke is most commonly put in that same time frame, roughly around 85 or 90. A few people argue that Luke-Acts is much later, but I don't think they reflect the majority position. So roughly around 90 for both of them is the common wisdom I hear.

**Shanks:** Dom, you used the word *parousia* without defining it.

**Crossan:** *Parousia* simply means presence. It's the coming of a king to his country, as it were. It's used to mean the return of Jesus, the second coming, the end of the world, with the scenario left magnificently vague, but with certainty that everything is going to be really different after that. We, the good people, are going to be triumphant, and you, whoever you are, the bad people, are really going to get it. I think of it, to be blunt with you, as divine ethnic cleansing.

**Shanks:** Steve, you spoke of Josephus' testimony. How do we know that Jesus even existed? Some people doubt his existence. You spoke of not only New Testament

testimonies and witnesses, but also of Josephus, and, I believe, you mentioned the Talmud. The question that has been raised is that these extra-New Testament witnesses are not entirely reliable. Would you comment on that?

**Stephen J. Patterson:** I would just say that none of these texts is any closer chronologically, historically, or socially to Jesus of Nazareth than our Gospels. So in this sense, they certainly are no more reliable sources of information than the Gospels. But since scholars normally regard the Christian Gospels as theologically tendentious, they are almost universally rejected as reliable historical sources in scholarly circles. And so it's helpful to try to shore up at least a few basic points using other secular historians who are not so committed to the Christian cause. But as you rightly point out, these historians are not historians in the modern sense. As ancient persons, they have no more modern historical sensibility than Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. So, while secular historians are helpful in establishing basic facts such as the historical existence of Jesus, we should not feel overly confident about the few facts they might give us about Jesus' life.

**Shanks:** Isn't the Josephus text you read from the *Testimonium Flavianum*? From Flavius Josephus? Isn't that regarded as a late Christian interpolation into Josephus?

**Patterson:** The text I read from Josephus' work *The Antiquities of the Jews* is not entirely a Christian interpolation. There are parts of it, however, that are almost universally recognized as Christian interpolations. You must remember that all of these texts, whether by Josephus or Roman historians or Greek historians, all of them were preserved by Christians. That is, they were all passed along from antiquity to the modern period through the Christian monastic tradition of copying and preserving manuscripts. Since the hand copying of manuscripts is an imprecise process, very few ancient manuscripts managed to survive antiquity without corruption. And Josephus, of course, is a good example of that. There are many, many Christian interpolations in Josephus, places where Josephus' words are amended to reflect a Christian perspective. The text that I read to you this morning has several such interpolations; however, I took the liberty of purging them as I read.

**Shanks:** Is this Josephus text an example of a text that's been tampered with? We're not talking about biblical texts now but other kinds of texts. Can't this passage from

Josephus serve as an example that the same kind of thing happened in the transmission of biblical texts?

**Patterson:** Yes, we have the same problem with biblical manuscripts. The Greek New Testament, the text that scholars use in their work and the text upon which all modern translations are based, does not actually exist in antiquity. It is a critical reconstruction, that is, a conglomeration of and a melding of the best readings of literally hundreds of ancient manuscripts, no single one of which is flawless. That is to say, every manuscript from antiquity has errors, usually lots of errors. The first job of a biblical scholar is to go through all of these manuscripts and, by a process of comparison, weed out as many of these errors as possible in an effort to come up with a text, a critically reconstructed text or a conglomerate text, if you will, that is as free of late emendations and tampering as possible. This sort of work must be done across the board on all ancient texts. None of them, not even the best biblical manuscripts, has been handed down to us error free, and it is the first job of scholars to come up with a text that stands as close to the original autograph as possible.

**Question:** Could you very briefly recap where the gospel authors came from? Not location, but did any of them know Jesus? Who did they know? Who were they writing for? You know, what was their general purpose? Mark, Matthew, Luke, Thomas, John and Paul. I mean, just one sentence.

**Borg:** I'm leaving Paul off the list for the moment. About the others, we don't know anything at all about who they were. With almost complete certainty, we can say they did not bear the names by which the gospels are known. None of them knew Jesus while he was alive. They weren't the 12 disciples. That is, John wasn't written by one of the Twelve; Matthew wasn't written by one of the Twelve. So in that sense, they are all anonymous documents. I think it's also safe to say that they were all written for Christian communities and not really for the larger world. That is, they are in-house documents for a worshipping community.

**Shanks:** To what audience were they addressed? We often hear of the Johannine community or the Lukan community or Matthean community. Are those hypothetical? Or can we say anything specific about the audiences to which the canonical Gospels and Thomas and Q were addressed?

**Patterson:** I will speak to that. But first I want to add just one more thing about the authors themselves. The fact that they could write means that they belonged to the very upper stratum of Greek and Roman and Jewish society. This is indicated by the mere fact that they were literate. So few people were literate in the ancient world, this would have separated the gospel writers from the vast majority of Christians. So one of the things that sometimes troubles me is that we have in the written legacy of ancient Christianity something that is not the product, or at least not the direct product, of most Christians living in antiquity. It is the product of a very small, elite group within that community. I think we have to take that into consideration when we read these documents.

I do think, however, that these authors were writing for communities, presumably communities in which they lived. And these texts would have normally been read aloud to people. So that the experience of a gospel for an ancient Christian would normally have been an oral experience, that is, they heard a gospel read to them. This implies, of course, that the relationship between author and audience was much more intimate than can be assumed for most literature today.

Who were the communities for whom these texts were written? What were these communities like? The Johannine community is probably one that we would consider relatively sectarian. It perceives itself as being persecuted. It has probably been in conflict with the larger Jewish community. It is a Jewish community, perhaps a Jewish gentile community, but it perceives itself as having been cast out of the larger Jewish community and, for that reason, has sort of hunkered down for the long haul. The Gospel itself promises this community the presence of the spirit of Jesus for comfort in this time of turmoil and trouble. Let me defer to the others for the other gospels.

**Crossan:** The result of this would be that we have to face an intense pluralism as far back as we can go in the history of the Christian movement.

**Q:** We've been talking about the historical Jesus and, by inference, the religion that evolved as a result of his life. But I'm wondering if you would comment on what that religion might be like today if Paul had never come on the scene.

**Crossan:** It's very important to take class or, if you prefer, where you are in the pecking order, into account. Before Paul, apart from Paul, there were already at least two

elements we can distinguish—the type of people we talked about in connection with the Q gospel or the early Thomas movement, both of whom could well be peasants. That element required no one to search the scriptures to see if Jesus could be the Elect One of God.

But there was also a second element, followers of Jesus who were learned, and they're before Paul. As far as I can see, they were there from the beginning, and they're connected with Jerusalem. So I imagine in Galilee and Syria, in that area, there were people who continued the lifestyle of Jesus. I don't mean they were only peasants, but you could be in that wing of the movement even if you were a peasant. If you were in Jerusalem searching the Scriptures, you could not participate fully unless you could read. But that was also there before Paul. So already, the peasants and the retainers were starting to take over. Paul is just one more retainer. But there were retainers before him.

**Borg:** The beginning of a gentile mission was there before Paul, so that can't be ascribed simply to Paul. But trying to imagine Christianity without the Pauline epistles and the effect the Pauline epistles have had is very interesting. It means that a lot of vocabulary that's common in the Christian church would certainly not be there. For example, language that has been particularly important in the Protestant tradition—justification, sanctification and so forth. We simply wouldn't use that language. Whether we might still talk about those things in different words, I think, is quite possible.

**Patterson:** I thought I detected in the question a somewhat pejorative tone relative to Paul. Paul is often given a rather rough shake today in enlightened circles. There are many reasons for this. Often, it is because people fail to distinguish critically between Paul's authentic letters and letters that were attributed to Paul later, which he did not in fact write, such as, for example, the pastoral epistles—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. In those epistles, we find some of the most problematic things for people to accept, especially in terms of women and women's roles in the church today.

But I think Paul, for all his faults, did have some important insights. And one of them has to do with the implications of Jesus' preaching for community life. Paul insisted that for communities to be authentically Christian they must be mixed groups; in particular, they must be communities that include both Jews and gentiles. Now, you have to understand that this meant Paul's churches had to include people from two sides of a

very tumultuous and contested social boundary. Paul insisted that the social implications, the communal implications, of the gospel meant that people had to learn to live together in diverse, tolerant communities. And I think that's one of the most important insights of the early Christian movement. Without Paul, we may not have had that so clearly expressed.

**Crossan:** Could I add one thing to that? I asked you to imagine early Christianity before Paul. Imagine Paul before Lutheranism. In Rome, what was important was not Paul, but Peter and Paul. Peter and Paul, always together and always in that order. You had Romulus and Remus, the hero twins of the empire. Now we have our hero twins, Peter and Paul. We talk about them as martyrs. We don't mention that Paul wrote letters. We're not too certain we can even handle it. But they're martyrs, and they're a pair, and they're a pair in that order. That's very important, I think, to understanding how Paul became important before Protestantism.

**Borg:** When I was teaching in a Protestant ecumenical seminary a few years ago, I had Catholic students as well as Protestant students in my class. We got to Paul, and about two-thirds of the class was talking about justification by grace. Finally, one of the Catholic students raised her hand and said, "What's justification? I have never heard of the word." That's a way of underlining how Paul has been highlighted by the effect of the Protestant Reformation on Christianity.

**Q:** Harold Bloom, the literary critic, didn't make a lot of friends among biblical scholars with his introduction to *The Book of J* (Random House, 1991). But he made an interesting observation that I'd like to comment on. He says that, in so many religions, first there's a visionary who creates or receives the message of the religion, and then there's a bureaucrat who puts it into practice. In the United States, for instance, we had Joseph Smith, the visionary, and then Brigham Young was, say, the first CEO, of Salt Lake City. In the case of the New Testament, we have Jesus, the visionary, and then Paul, the one who formulates rules and helps put the faith into practice. Would you say something about this?

**Borg:** Bloom is using a distinction that comes from Abraham Maslow at this point. And it's an interesting distinction. Maslow wrote about peak experiences, which most of you have heard of. Maslow makes the very interesting, but a little bit lopsided, observation that religions are founded by people who have peak experiences, and they are

sustained by non-peakers, that is, by bureaucrats who don't have peak experiences. If you don't have peak experiences, you think that what the religion is about is the words rather than what the words say. In early Christianity, though, I don't think I would speak of Jesus as the visionary and Paul as the bureaucrat or the codifier. If we want to look for people who fit into that category, let me pick my favorite whipping boy in the New Testament. It would be the author of Matthew's Gospel. I think among the Gospels, Matthew seems to be moving more in the direction of a kind of conventional wisdom and a concern with church order. So I think that process is going on in early Christianity, but I wouldn't see Jesus and Paul as the central figures in that contrast.

**Q:** I thought I heard Dom say about the virgin birth that he believed that James could be Jesus' elder brother. I'm not here to draw lines between Protestantism and Catholicism, but I do know this. Without the virgin birth, if Jesus was blemished, I can hang on a cross for everybody in here and it does nobody any good. There's no eternal life. I'm not here to critique anybody, but I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

**Crossan:** I think what I would say to that is you have to listen to the other people in the audience.

**Borg:** I'll comment briefly on the connection between a literal or biological virgin birth and Jesus being free of blemish. The idea is that only if he's free of blemish can he be an adequate sacrifice for sin. That's the logic of part of your comment. I would simply note that the image of Jesus as free from sin, free from blemish, is really something that goes along with the metaphor or the image of Jesus as the Lamb of God who dies for the sins of the world. A sacrificial lamb had to be without blemish, therefore it gets attached to Jesus. Later in the tradition, the virgin birth is explained on these grounds: "Well, that's how he could be without sin."

What's going on here is the literalizing of a metaphor. The metaphor is very, very powerful as a metaphor. To say that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world is to say there is nothing that separates us from God except our own sense of unworthiness. Everything's been taken care of, is the meaning of that metaphor. When the metaphor is literalized, I think, it gets inappropriately tied up with the conception of Jesus.

**Patterson:** I would like to add to that. I think that what we have said this afternoon and this morning in terms of history, especially the negative conclusions we have come to, is often difficult for people with strong religious convictions to accept because in our culture we associate truth so closely with historical accuracy and reliability with historical facticity. I would simply like to remind you that that is a modern sensibility. People in the ancient world seem to have no concern about that at all. They do not share our assumptions. And so when one looks at the Gospel of Mark and reads it as though it were a factual report, and if, at the same time, one assumes that it has no validity unless it is factual, then you are insisting on reading that Gospel in your own terms instead of the terms in which Mark originally wrote it. It is your prerogative to do that, but you should not assume the universal validity of your perspective.

But you should understand that, when we analyze these texts historically, we are not assuming that their validity rests upon historical reliability. We are simply trying to understand these texts in the terms in which they were originally written. And that means we cannot bring to them a modern sort of historical agenda or try to recast them and make them into something we wish they were rather than what they are. So I would remind you that just because we call the virgin birth mythic or fictional—and I would concur with Dom that the virgin birth is not an historical fact—does not mean that I do not believe what the virgin birth seems to be saying.

The story of the virgin birth is the story of the birth of a god. It is Luke's way of saying that in Jesus we have encountered the face of God. And that is a faith claim. It asks one to put one's chips with Jesus. The risk involved in that cannot be minimized by historical investigation. That is, I can affirm what Luke is saying without having to embrace the ancient idiom he uses to express that claim. In other words, you don't have to adopt an ancient idiom as literally true in order to profess Christian faith in the 20th century.

**Shanks:** And that's an excellent place to end, in a wonderful spirit. You've been a wonderful audience, and your participation has been buoying and sustaining for us. Thank you indeed.