

Mystery of Origins.

I was not raised as a Christian; so I am a convert. An adult convert.

This was many years ago.

At that time I had one nagging question: was it all true?
That is, historically?

The truth question was not my new friends were asking.
They just said it was.

Anyway I finished up leaving my job in the building industry
and studying for the ministry
and then becoming a seminary teacher and a preacher.

But I still asked myself, 'Is it true?'
It was not a question that kept me awake at night.
But it was still there.

So alongside my teaching job
I enrolled in Ancient History and Greek at Sydney University.

I had my answer quickly, within a few months of studying Roman History.

I was bitten by the history bug,
which has become work and hobby rolled into one.

So I continued studying ancient history
and this issued in two thesis-based higher degrees,
the writing of articles and books
and numerous visits to Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Turkey and Greece.
I have just come back from my umpteenth visit to Turkey and Greece,
walking with others in the footsteps of Paul and John.

Let me give some reasons why I answer my history-based question
positively.

FIRST: Jesus was genuine figure of history.

The main evidence is the New Testament itself.

But there is a scatter of evidence from other sources.

Tacitus is our major source for the Roman world in the century of Jesus.

He describes the fire that destroyed most of Rome in the year 64.

Many blamed the fire on Nero.

Nero in turn 'scapegoated' a new sect, the Christiani.

To be a scapegoat a group had to be both visible and hated.

In *Annals* xv.44 Tacitus explains where these 'Christians' came from.

The 'founder of the name Christian' was 'Christ'.

This 'Christ' had been executed thirty years earlier

in Judaea in the time of Tiberius by Pilate the governor of the province.

But the 'sect' did not die with its founder (as most movements did).

It sprang up again in Judaea and spread to Rome

where it had become an 'immense multitude' (as Tacitus called it).

Tacitus, though, was sickened

at the punishment meted out to these wretches.

Crucified by the thousands and then daubed with pitch and set alight.

Tacitus had been a member of the Roman Senate

and himself governor of a major province.

He had access to imperial records.

Tacitus knew what he was talking about.

So Tacitus the ever careful historian pinpoints Christ's execution as to

(1) *time* (AD 30),

(2) *place* (Judaea)

(3) *circumstance* (treason).

And he explains how these 'Christians' came to be in Rome in the year 64.

No serious scholar known to me doubts Tacitus' account.

Here I make an observation that is important to me.

World history has noted Christian origins.
 Not just Christian history.
 World history.
 World history, furthermore, that was independent of Christian sources.

Tacitus' information most likely comes from official Roman reports.
 Crucifixions in the provinces were the subject of reports filed in official archives in Rome.

As a former Roman consul Tacitus had access to such records.

But then I notice something else.

The narrative of Luke and Acts (which is one book in two volumes) tells the same narrative as Tacitus when reduced to its broad outline. Christ was executed in Judaea in the time of Tiberius by Pontius Pilate the governor and the movement sprang up again and had spread beyond Judaea including to Rome.

Tacitus the historian and Luke-Acts agree:

Who founded Christianity:	Christ
Where it was founded:	Judaea
When it was founded:	When Pilate was Prefect of Judaea.
Circumstances of its founding:	After the execution of Christ
Progress of the movement:	It spread from Judaea to Rome.

One further comment about Tacitus.
 Tacitus is a hostile witness.
 He hates Jews and he hates Christians.
 His corroboration of the outlines of Christian history is the more valuable because he is hostile.

SECOND: The New Testament talks about Jesus and the early Christians in the same way it mentions famous people and events.

The New Testament often connects to prominent figures in world history.

Herod king of the Jews,
Herod tetrarch of Galilee;
Pilate, Sergius Paulus, Felix, Festus, Roman governors;
Caiaphas High Priest in Jerusalem;
Aretas King of the Arabians;
Emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius;
a great famine in the time of Claudius.

These are all real people and events known from world history and archaeology and they appear in the pages of the New Testament.

Just as world history noticed Christ and Christians,
reciprocally (as it were)
Christian history notices famous people in world history.

And they appear in the New Testament in the same way
Jesus, Peter, John, Luke, Mark and Paul do.

In other words, the people we specially meet in the New Testament –
Jesus in particular – are not mythical or legendary – but real and
historical.

It's worth remembering that the Graeco-Roman world was a golden age in
terms of education and literature.

We know far more about the times of Jesus in the Graeco-Roman world
than Europe during the thousand years from the Fall of Rome until the
Renaissance.

They were, indeed, 'dark ages' compared to the brilliance of the age of
Rome and the Caesars.

I visited Ephesus again a few weeks back.

Paul established Christianity in this great city.

Aqueducts brought water 40 kilometres for this city of 250,000.

Running water served the homes.

There was reticulated sewerage.

Elegant villas.

Beautiful frescoes decorated the walls with scenes from Homer.

Finely chiselled statues and fountains adorned the streets.

A theatre accommodating an audience of 25,000 people.

The comedies of Aristophanes and the tragedies of Aeschylus.

The Library of Celsus with many thousands of scrolls.

The sophisticated tools used by stonemasons and builders.
The ingenious surgical instruments used by doctors.
Civic life was more coherent in that city than in ours today.
City squares, gymnasiums, sports arenas, playhouses, a great theatre.
Civic life much more focused than in our sprawling technopolies.
Cities like Ephesus were found every few miles.
Magnesia, Priene, Miletus, Aphrodisias, Didyma, Halicarnassus...

The world in which Christ was born and his Gospel was preached was not 'stone age' or 'primitive'.

There may have been a Camelot and there may have been a king called Arthur, or there may not have been.
But there can be no doubt about the nature of the world into which Christ was born.

The documents of the New Testament – the Gospels, the Acts, the Letters – speak about real people in a known world.

I have personally seen

- the inscription dedicated by Pontius Pilate to his emperor Tiberius,
- the burial chest (ossuary) of Caiaphas the High Priest
- the inscription bearing the name Sergius Paullus (Acts 13).

I have walked on the pavement dedicated to Erastus of Corinth (likely mentioned in Romans 16).

The Gospels and Acts and Letters are carefully written by real people in that world known to us from other sources.

These documents write about Jesus, Peter and Paul in exactly the same down to earth terms as they refer to known figures from the world history of that day.

Is the New Testament history? Indeed it is.

THIRD: All the texts of the New Testament were written close in time to Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark was written by 70; 40 years after Jesus.
The Letters of Paul are written from 50; 20 years after Jesus.

This struck me like a thunderbolt when I did Ancient History 101 at University.

The evidence for the people we were studying – Alexander, Augustus, Nero – often came from many years after them.
It is hard to find a famous person of the times for whom the evidence is so close as it is for Jesus.

Paul's earliest letters are written within 20 years of Jesus.
My youngest child has more years
than the years separating Paul from Jesus.

I remember what I was doing and where I was doing it
when she was being born more than 30 years ago.

Mark's Gospel was published within 40 years of Jesus.
I have been married 40 years.
I remember the time, the place, what the minister said
what colour suit I wore.

It is more than 40 years since I was in Seminary.
I remember my teachers and I remember their teachings.

Mark was as close to Jesus in terms of years
as I am to the day I was married
or to the time I was instructed by my teachers.

The documents of the New Testament were all written
and in circulation
within a life time of Jesus' lifetime.

Those who were his original disciples spanned from Jesus
into the early church where they were leaders and missionaries,
guaranteeing that what was preached and written
was true to the facts about Jesus.

The disciples did not die with their Master

but spanned on for the next 30 years (in the case of Peter) and 60 years (in the case of John).

In other words,
the written texts that come down to us as the New Testament were either written by these disciples or were validated by them.

Suetonius wrote his Lives of the Caesars including of Tiberius. But Tiberius has been dead a hundred years when Suetonius wrote. Mark wrote his Gospel less than forty years after Jesus. It was not a cold biography but a living text the written down version of what had been preached in the years between Jesus and the moment Mark dipped his pen in ink and opened his scroll and began to write.

FOURTH: Our sources for Jesus are numerous.

Augustus was the greatest of the Roman emperors who ruled for nearly half a century and brought peace to the world – the Pax Romana.

For Augustus we rely on Appian, Suetonius, Dio Cassius each of whom wrote a century or more after his death.

Jesus was born under that emperor's (Augustus') rule;
from an obscure corner of the empire (land-locked Galilee);
a member of a despised race (a Jew);
and was *crucified* (unmentionable in polite society).

For Augustus almost nothing survives.
For Jesus a crucified nobody from a despised race we have earlier and better sources of evidence than for the greatest Roman in history:

The four Gospels
the Synoptic Gospel sources 'Q', 'L', 'M'
the Letters of Paul, James, Peter, Jude and John
and the Revelation.

About a dozen in all – mostly primary, underived sources.

So many fingers each pointing to:

Jesus, who is called Christ
of the royal line of David
the Son of God
crucified for sins
raised alive from the dead

The closeness of the evidence to the person, and the extensive and diverse nature of the evidence is very impressive, historically.

We have a sense of its historical reliability.

In that world only the truly famous were remembered in print.

History remembers winners not losers.

Totally unremembered. Not even their names.

You and I might be nobodies.

But our names will be remembered in the archives.

But not nobodies then.

It was as if they never were.

So we contrast the greatest of the great, Augustus with Jesus the crucified Jew from nowhere, a real nobody.

Augustus is unremembered except for scraps of information that have survived from a century and more later.

Jesus has a dozen or so vibrant documents that were written within a lifetime of his lifetime.

Historians are by definition curious, ever looking for explanations. The word 'history' (historia) means 'enquiry'.

How did this man Jesus, a sociological 'nobody', generate this plethora of early documentation.

In my opinion, two things alone account for this.

His identity: the Son of God.
What happened to him: he was raised alive from the dead.

FIFTH: There is an unbroken transmission between Jesus and us.

Jesus was raised from the dead on the first day of the week.
So say each of the Gospels.
He appeared to his disciples on the **first** first day of the week.
He appeared to his disciples on the **second** first day of the week.
As Thomas had good reason to remember,
not having been there on that first Sunday,
and having doubted that Jesus had been raised alive.

Every Sunday since – for 2000 years –
disciples have met on that resurrection day, the first day of the week.

At first those original disciples spread Jesus' words and works orally.
Very soon they committed that word to writing.
The churches were adapted synagogues.
Like synagogues their core activity was reading their texts.
That's what they chiefly did when they met on Sundays.
They read the writings of the apostles to one another.
The Qu'ran calls Christians 'people of the book' and that is correct.

This is how it happened:

First there was Jesus the teacher and saviour.
Then his disciples oralized his words and works as they missionized.
Seamlessly that missionizing orality became textualized, written.
By the end of the textuality phase we already have an important
phenomena – copying and publishing these texts.
Every new church must have texts for reading on Sundays.
The Corinthians would copy Paul's letters to them
and exchange their copies with the Ephesians.
The seven churches of Revelation would each have their copy.

Tacitus and Pliny each called Christianity a spreading disease.

Look at maps of churches in AD 40

- Jerusalem, Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea (in Palestine), Antioch (in Syria),
Shechem (in Samaria), Ptolemais, Tyre, Sidon (in Phoenicia)

Rome (in Italy).

Look at a map of churches in AD 50.

- all of the above

AND Tarsus (in Cilicia), Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe (in Anatolia),
Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, Corinth (Greece).

Keep looking at these maps every decade for the next 200 years and
what do you see? Measles.

Dots on maps representing churches in every country ringing the
Mediterranean.

By AD 300 hundred, even thousands of them.

Spreading like rampant measles.

A movement growing from a few thousand in AD 30
to perhaps 10 million by AD 313 when Constantine
saw a vision of the cross in the sky with words, 'By this conquer.'

The point is that these churches met on Sundays for one main reason.

To read the writings of the apostles (along with the Old Testament).

So what did they need?

They needed copies.

Many such copies have survived.

Some very early.

A few lines from John from early in the second century
that is likely a copy of the autograph that John wrote.

From the second century P46 (in Dublin) – Paul's letters.

P45 (in Dublin) the Gospels and the Acts.

From the 300's the whole NT found in the late 1800's by von Tischendorf
at St Catherine's Mt Sinai purchased from the Russians pre world war 2
for 100,000 pounds and now in the British Museum.

From the early centuries there are 5000 texts of the NT,

in part or whole,

in Greek, Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian.

Perhaps we know how many manuscripts there are of Tacitus' Annals?

One. Discovered in the 1500's.

Also in those early centuries after the NT period the early church Fathers who quote extensively from the NT.

You can cut and paste the whole NT from quotations of it in the early church fathers.

By an objective science called Textual Criticism we are confident that the NT we read is 99% certain to be the NT as it left the hands of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude and the writer to the Hebrews.

Several things guarantee this.

One is that Christianity always was a missionary movement

Another is that converts were gathered into churches.

Another is churches met weekly for their core activity - reading.

Another is that churches multiplied exponentially.

Another is that they needed copies, copies and more copies.

Another is that thousands of those copies in various languages have survived the ravages of time.

In other words the very nature of the movement created the situation whereby today we may be confident of the integrity of the texts we read.

SIXTH: I don't know what else could have given rise to the texts of the New Testament except that Jesus was the Son of God, raised from the dead?

These sources say that Jesus was the Son of God who died for our sins and was raised alive from the dead.

They were either right or they were wrong.

If wrong logically we would have to say they were either *sincerely* wrong (misguided) or *insincerely* wrong (mischievous).

Am I able to read these ten disparate independent sources and conclude they are misguided or mischievous?

Either of those verdicts would be verdicts about me. That I was reading with a jaundiced eye.

The nature of the evidence – its earliness and its independence - drives me to reach another conclusion – that they portray Jesus as he was.

My sense is that they know what they are talking about.
The New Testament ‘rings true’.

That is a subjective judgement.

It is my judgement.

It is a judgement each of us must make for ourselves.

Let me summarise:

1. There can be no doubt that Jesus was a genuine figure of history that he was crucified under the Roman Governor, Pilate circa 30 and that within 30 years there were many Christians in Rome.
2. The New Testament mentions famous people and events in the same way that it talks about Jesus and the first Christians.

The NT is about real people in real places in real circumstances.
This is not the stuff of myth and legend.

3. The New Testament was written within a lifetime after Jesus. Mark’s Gospel was written only 40 years after Jesus and Paul’s earliest letters within 20 years of Jesus.

The evidence for Jesus is closer than for almost all great figures in that era.

4. There are as many as a dozen independent primary sources of information about Jesus, each pointing to him as Son of God and raised from the dead.

Even great leaders like Augustus have nothing like this attestation. For a ‘nobody’ to have this documentation demands that he was a somebody.

5. The nature of Christianity as a missionary movement that meets on Sundays to read texts guaranteed that a plethora of texts survived from that era guaranteeing the practical probity of those texts.
6. It is difficult to account for the rise of Christianity and the writing of the NT unless Jesus was the Son of God, raised from the dead. Misguided? All twelve? All of them? Surely not. Mischievous? All twelve? All of them? Again, surely not.

Many years ago I asked the question, 'Is it true?'
You have my answers in my paper tonight.

I called this paper 'the mystery of origins'.

What is the 'mystery'?

Just this.

The evidence from origins is compelling.

Why don't more people believe it?