

Chapter six: A snapshot in time

Letters and messages, which were seen as important to Christian communities, were copied by hand and circulated. The text often changed, in this process, through the introduction of inadvertent errors and sometimes deliberate alterations. This makes it harder later on to decide, where there are variants, what was more original. In one sense, however, this was a means of preserving what was written. Copies provided back-ups, making it less likely that a text would be entirely lost. It was furthermore more difficult, when there were many copies, successfully to introduce a drastically different new version which would have had many voices speaking against it.

The greatest change happened initially in adapting a pesher-style commentary to provide a gospel narrative, improvising dialogue or adapting it from other sources including Paul's letters. Much later, when Christianity was poised for further expansion, having become one of the religions of empire, there was a need for more copies of the gospels. I will argue that, although there may have been little scope for wholesale change, there were nonetheless some significant innovations introduced for reasons of policy or doctrine. New copies made in bulk made it possible in some critical respects to supplant an older message.

At around the end of the first and into the next century, new gospels were produced to stand alongside Mark as competitors. Though largely sourced in Mark, these claimed their own authority, not as copies but through their attribution to other authors.

Of the other canonical (and non-canonical) gospels, Matthew most directly copies Mark. As an exercise in seeing how Mark was added to and altered, and what may have been more original, I will be taking the first fifteen verses which introduce this gospel:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness.

Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'

John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*.

And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now, John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed, 'the one who is more powerful than me is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptised you with water for repentance but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days, Jesus came from *Nazareth* of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And immediately coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the spirit descending like a dove on him.

And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my son, the beloved; with you, I am well pleased.'

And the spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, *and he was with the wild beasts*, and the angels waited on him.

Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee. He proclaimed the good news of God saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.

There are few early manuscripts for large parts of Mark and some parts of Matthew. The text given above is translated from the earliest that has these verses, Codex Sinaiticus, from the mid fourth century.

With a few minor changes in wording, some very substantial additions to the text and just a very few deletions, Matthew takes on board the whole of Mark’s introduction. The few complete deletions are shown in italics in the above-quoted text.

A couple of sections were introduced attacking the main Jewish groups, Pharisees and Sadducees, as a ‘brood of vipers’, warning Jews that they cannot rely on their ancestry to escape from the wrath to come! There is an elaboration to explain how Jesus had precedence, even though baptised by John. Matthew also makes an explicit connection of John with prophecy as the ‘voice in the wilderness’.

Matthew elaborates substantially on the temptations visited on Jesus by Satan in the desert. Before taking up Mark’s narrative, he provides his own introduction – a huge addition – with a genealogy for Jesus followed by the nativity story. This latter culminates in an explanation of how the family ended up (supposedly) in Nazareth. Joseph went there for fear of the capricious new ruler of Judea, Archelaus, so that also what was spoken through the prophets’ might be fulfilled: ‘he will be called a Nazarene’.

Leaving aside, for the moment, this latter, highly contentious assertion, the first of Matthew’s few deletions (see above, in italics) is explained. The first sentence of Mark is not needed, since Matthew has offered his own introduction.

That Jesus was ‘with the wild beasts’ got lost in an extended portrayal of the temptations by Satan or possibly it was seen as inappropriate for a figure of Jesus’ standing.

There are two possibly, theologically-motivated deletions. John is being portrayed in Matthew as making the way for Jesus. But the first part of the prophetic quote in Mark talks of coming to prepare ‘your way’, that is a way for the people. Not entirely consistent with Matthew’s perception, this was cut out. It might also be said that this part of the quote is from Malachi and not Isaiah and so might also have been eliminated for the sake of accuracy!

A second omission may have been to do with the belief that only God (and perhaps Jesus as God) could forgive sins. However, in Mark, John is described as ‘proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’. He is depicted as a mere mortal, paving the way for Jesus. Thus, he could not forgive sins. So, the latter part of this, ‘for the forgiveness of sins’ was also cut out.

That is it, then. We have a good sense that the author of Matthew saw and utilised the whole of Mark’s text. We can see what he added and why, what he eliminated and why and what must also have been there, when he was looking at the papyrus manuscript all those long years ago.

Well, that is it, except for just one word. Nazareth.

Matthew failed to replicate the word in the passage where Mark, as we now have it, claims Jesus came from, ‘Nazareth in (or of) Galilee’. And that is what, above all, the author Matthew was keen to substantiate in his introduction. This was so much so that he has his prologue, before the start of Mark, end with an entirely spurious, invented prophecy that Jesus had to live in Nazareth because it was prophesied that, ‘He will be called a Nazarene’.

There is no such prophecy in the Old Testament or in any other Jewish work. In Mark, there is no reference to Nazareth other than the one shown above, in the introduction. Jesus is depicted rather as living and working in Capernaum, as he is also in the other gospels. Matthew explains this as the result of a move by Jesus from Nazareth in fulfilment of an obscure and unevicenced Old Testament prophecy under which God would in future favour some territories over others. This does not hold, even in its own terms, since both Capernaum and Nazareth are in Galilee.

Why was Matthew so intent on having Jesus coming from Nazareth and the term Nazarene as meaning the same? It is that the group, with which Jesus was associated and to which Paul stood accused of belonging, was a ferociously zealous Jewish sect, concerned to protect the Temple from pollution from Gentiles and other foreigners and to enforce on its members adherence to its Law. This is something which does not sit comfortably with Matthew's view of a Christian Jesus.

So, why then did he apparently fail to include, in copying, the *only* reference in Mark to Jesus being from or 'of Nazareth' – something that Matthew really did want to convey? The answer must be that, for the scribe working on his revision of Mark around the year CE 100, the reference simply was not there.

This is thus something that was later interpolated into Mark, perhaps in an effort to harmonise with what is there elsewhere in Matthew. It happened at some time in the long period from the compilation of Matthew until the mid-fourth century when Codex Sinaiticus was written, bringing to us the first surviving evidence of the beginning of Mark. It means that in Mark, more originally, there was no reference to Nazareth at all.

So, we have in a significant respect been able to discriminate and see, through the eyes of a scribe nineteen centuries ago, what was and what was not there right in front of him. Real time travel, without the need for fictitious machines that compress space into blue boxes, and just as much fun!

Outside of the New Testament, there are no early references to Nazareth. The use of the word Nazarene in context, especially as the sect to which Paul was accused of belonging, indicates that this word referred to an organisation rather than a place. Though there is some similarity, its spelling is different from that of Nazareth, which ends with the letter tau in Greek.

Since there is no available early record, we cannot tell how Nazareth may have originated in Hebrew or Aramaic. Nazarene appears to have come have come from the verb *nasar*, meaning to keep or preserve or the noun *neser* meaning branch or shoot, both rendered by the base נצר, *nun – sadhe – resh*.

The fix that Matthew tried, with the retrospective use of real and imputed prophecy, is clearly wrong and the two words are distinct. It is unscholarly to continue to translate the four references that there are to Jesus, as 'the Nazarene' in Mark as meaning 'of Nazareth'! Modern translators help to perpetuate the disingenuous author of Matthew's myth.