

ON THE HISTORICAL GAP

We are having trouble reconciling the potential 60+ year gap between Jesus' resurrection and the first known surviving manuscript, thinking that 60+ years is a lot of time between the supposed act in history and the historical record. Some think that is a lot of time for "stories" to be made up into what is now understood as the gospel.

The historical event of Jesus' life and resurrection occurred sometime between 4 BC and AD 33. The earliest extant (surviving) witness to this account was a papyrus fragment of John 18:31-33 (r) and 18:37-38 (v) titled P⁵², dated to the turn of the first century. That leaves an approximate 65-year gap (as you pointed out) between the actual historical event and the earliest surviving written account of that event. However, the fragment is definitely a copy (and probably a copy of a copy and so forth) of the original, which would have been written on a scroll (the codex form of writing was invented later in the first century) sometime previous . . . obviously a copy does not precede the original. A case can be made that Mark's Gospel was composed during the reign of Claudius (AD 41-54) and that he drew heavily on the eyewitness testimony of Peter, according to the early church father Papias, a disciple of John (Eusebius recorded Papias' testimony in *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.15). If Mark's Gospel was written in the 40s or 50s then really the gap you are talking about is approximately 10-20 years, not 60.

The natural question follows, *how reliable is the oral transmission of the historical account during the first decades following Jesus' death and resurrection?* I do not, however, believe that the assumption of oral transmission only prior to the Gospels should automatically be granted. As Eddy & Boyd have pointed out, "One must beware of the all-too-common caricature of 'oral peasant culture' and its supposedly simplistic, nonliterary, isolated 'little tradition.'" In fact, there is epigraphic evidence that literacy in the ancient world was more widespread than is often believed. On top of that it is understood that literacy among the Jews was treated as a trained virtue, so common people could interact with the Torah and prophets, a discipline central both to an individual Jew's identity and also the identity of the nation. While not all of Jesus' disciples were "learned" (Acts 4:13, this term should be taken in a similar way we use it today . . . meaning the men received no advanced education), it is highly probable that all received a standard Jewish education in a local synagogue, where reading and writing were essential. This would explain the existence of Q, a pre-gospel collection of sayings and teachings of Jesus compiled in the first few decades of the early church. Though this collection did not survive by itself, it is generally accepted that it (along with Mark) was a source for Matthew and Luke, who wrote their accounts decades after the resurrection. In that sense, it did survive in these two Gospels.

Even if we ignored all evidence to the contrary and granted that the early Christians were totally illiterate and transmitted the historical account of Jesus orally until the Gospels were penned, we still find ourselves on solid ground. The conclusions of anthropological studies conducted on orally dominant cultures show a general historical reliability regarding the transmission of a narrative over time. Evidence shows that if tradents (people entrusted with passing along stories) did not tell a story accurately they would be corrected by their audience, who generally knew the narrative framework that made up the story. Regarding primitive Christianity these tradents were no doubt the apostles and other

witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.¹ It was their responsibility to pass along the teachings and sayings of Jesus faithfully to the community of early believers. One could argue that the primitive oral transmission is strong evidence of the reliability of the historical account because the teachings and stories were told in community, where there existed a natural system of checks and balances. The fact that four Gospels that essentially contain the same narrative framework concerning Jesus were produced out of, then circulated among a community of eyewitnesses, people willing to give their lives to defend the validity of the text, is evidence of an historically strong oral tradition among the primitive church. Not to mention the fact that this remarkable story of a miracle working God / man arose out of the least likely community . . . people who staunchly believed that God is one. The most natural explanation for the widely accepted oral tradition among eyewitnesses belonging to a people least likely to produce “fairy tales” about God, is that a historical figure named Jesus made outstanding claims, performed amazing works, was crucified then resurrected, and that these people saw that happen.

Based on what I’ve laid out above it is most probable that both written and oral narratives regarding Jesus’ life and teaching were transmitted by eyewitnesses very early on and were used as a kind of “pre-Gospel reference” until the Gospels were produced and widely circulated. Frankly, there is too much evidence to the contrary to assume that illiterate peasants circulated legendary stories of a mythical Jesus that grew into fantastic tales of a miracle working deity. Considering the facts this assumption is simply not rooted in history.

I attempted to give a general reply to your question. There is so much regarding this question that I did not say, as indicated by comments like “evidence shows,” “a solid case can be made,” and “it is generally accepted.” If you’d like to dig deeper I strongly encourage it. A great place to start is with the “Who Do You Say That I Am?” Training Day (Fall 2015), or Eddy & Boyd’s *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition*, especially chapter six, “Ancient Literacy and Oral Tradition.”

¹ We see an example of this in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, which was probably written in the early 50s. Paul writes: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:3-6).