

# How Sagas Develop

## The Gospels as Examples

### Advanced

▶ About 2000 years ago a remarkable person lived in Palestine, taught as a rabbi, and was eventually crucified by the Romans. There is little doubt that an event called *the life and death of Jesus* really did take place. The question is: what do we know about it today?

- We know about the life and death of Jesus mostly from the four **gospels** contained in the bible, and from other stories in the new testament relating to the life and death of Jesus. We also have information from more than 10 "apocryphal" (=secret, hidden) gospels and other early writings that were *not* accepted into the bible, even so they were written by people who saw themselves as followers of Christ, i.e. as Christians. They weren't "apocryphal" in the sense of "secret" either. It's just that the winners of the fight about the "right way" didn't want them to be known. The *originals* of all those writings were written many years after Jesus' death - *and we don't have them*. The oldest manuscripts that we can read *today* were written hundreds of years after Jesus' death. In other words: what we do have in written form are handwritten copies of copies of copies.... In between copying, the manuscripts were also translated to Greek or Latin. And every time somebody copied a manuscript, he made involuntary mistakes ("typos") and more often than not also intentional changes. And it's *he* because few men were able to read and write and practically no women. What we have *now* and call "the **Bible**" are in fact lots of variants of the one and lost original that may be quite different from each other. The gospels in *your* bible (and note that there are several "official" versions of the Bible, depending on which branch of Christianity you pick) are therefore not what the apostles originally wrote, they are in all likelihood not even very close to those lost originals.

- There have been other (proto) Christian writings that we have neither as originals nor as copies. We know that those manuscripts existed because they are mentioned, sometimes at length, in the copies of writings that we do know of. We may also safely assume that some writings existed that we don't know anything about but which were known to the authors of the writings we do know about. What we don't have either is any written document from the Romans (who usually kept records of their court procedures) or other non-Christians like the Jews. In other words there is no "objective" contemporary record of the "Jesus event", except for a few lines of the 1st century Jewish historian **Josephus**. In his Jewish-history book that he wrote in 93 (about 60 years after Jesus' death; and once more we only have copies of copies, ...), he mentioned Jesus and his followers in just a few lines (and even those might have been changed and enlarged upon by the copyists).

▶ What we can conclude from this (and carry over to "sword" sagas) is that something that has *really* happened could have been seen as a momentous global affair by some people, and as a completely unimportant local affair by other folks.

- We can be reasonably sure that written accounts of some ancient event that got copied a lot and thus survived for centuries goes always back to people to whom whatever happened was of supreme importance. It follows that their accounts of the event are *always* biased in some way. This is certainly true for the four gospels in the bible (and for the apocryphal ones). Even the gospels in the bible are rather unreliable for reconstructing what *really* has happened for several reasons:

1. What we have is *not* what was originally written. All theologians agree that the current versions of the gospels contained in the bible contain numerous intentional changes and additions, made by a host of copyist to enforce certain dogmatic points of their view that had nothing to do with the "Jesus event".
2. The gospels certainly do have a lot in common (especially the "synoptic" three gospels of **Mark, Luke** and **Matthew**) but they are also full of *contradictions*.
3. It is clear from theological research that the gospel writers knew very little, if anything at all, about the *early life of Jesus*. Some (for example **John**) didn't seem to care much about that anyway. None of the authors (and I include here the authors of apocryphal texts) knew Jesus personally. What we read in the gospels about the early years of Jesus is thus extrapolated, to put it nicely, or freely invented with a purpose in mind, to say it as it is.
4. Certain things mentioned in gospels most certainly did *not happen*. There was, for example definitely no Roman "census" as reported in the gospel of Luke, where everybody was required to go and to be taxed in his own city. It would have made no sense whatsoever anyway. Why go to the city of one of your forefathers? Which one?

▶ Despite all the things we don't know for sure, serious theologians do know a lot about how the gospels came into being. Far more man-hours were dedicated to that question than to figuring out the origin of the "Sigfried stories, for example. That's why the gospels are such splendid examples for illustrating how sagas develop. We can retrace much of the process, in contrast to the Northern sagas.

What we know about the gospels and their evolution is:

- The gospel of Mark was the first to be written, about 70 AD, i.e. 40 years after the crucifixion. The gospels of Matthew and Luke followed about 10 to 20 years later. Both writers must have known Mark's gospel but they also must have had access to another written account (usually referred to as "Q"; short for "Quelle", German for "source"), of which no trace has been found up to now.

It is thus no surprise that there is a large degree of overlap concerning the basic story. The tough question is why Matthew and Luke felt the need to write new versions of the story, considering that at least one (Mark) but most likely two (Mark and "Q") had already been written - and they knew that!

The gospel of John was written around 90 AD and stands alone, it has little relation to the other three.

None of the gospel writers had known Jesus. So whatever they originally wrote was based on hearsay or written records that are now lost.

A lot of records from the early days of Christianity were lost, by the way, because shortly after the death of Jesus many divergent variants of Christian believe systems came into being. They were fighting each other tooth and nail, of course, and a lot of letters and epistles were written to promote the proper view (one's own) and to decry heresy (the viewpoint of the others). Forging letters (i.e. writing something in the name of somebody else) was common place. The "Paulus" faction eventually won, and not only saw to it that written documents from deviating factions were destroyed as far as possible, it also rewrote history omitting the problems of the past.

- While the gospels have a lot in common and thus allow us to get some idea of what really happened, they also contain conflicting parts as mentioned above. For example, both Luke and Matthew provide a detailed genealogy of Jesus and both trace him to King David. But the two bloodlines given are utterly different, not to mention that Jesus is traced to King David via Joseph, who, according to central dogma, is not related to Jesus at all. Why did those writers do such a stupid thing? Because it was very important to *them* that Jesus should come from the blood of King David. So they provided a line of ancestors (invented, of course, there was just no way of knowing) that could do the job. They may even have believed it. For them Jesus was the Messiah and the (Jewish) Messiah, by definition, was from King David's blood. It follows that Jesus was from King David's blood, period. They also weren't so stupid that they wouldn't have noticed the logical mistake with regard to Joseph. There are several indications that the virgin thing was *edited* into their gospels later by others. Joseph might well have been the father of Jesus as far as Luke and Matthew were concerned.

What we may conclude at this point is: stories that survived for centuries mostly by hearsay and handwritten copies of copies of copies, ... invariably create a *virtual reality*. This *virtual* reality is somehow connected to the *real* event but not necessarily very closely. In the mind of the readers / listeners the virtual reality replaces the true reality within at most one generation, because after one or two generations there was simply no way of knowing what had really happened. People essentially had to believe whatever they were given, they had no way of checking the facts. That's why there are so many faked documents from that time. If a letter stated that it was from Paul, how could you tell that somebody else wrote it?

- The situation is a bit different in our enlightened age. We have computers that can run through a manuscript word by word, compare usage of words, style and so on to other manuscripts, and show beyond doubt that some manuscripts are forgeries.

We have archeology as a science. By digging we keep finding old stuff that we can date rather precisely by various scientific means. We thus might find traces of the real event that give some *objective* information that go beyond what somebody might have written about it, and we might find *more* written sources, too.

With luck, we thus can find out to some extent what *really* has happened and then compare it to what people *thought* had happened, based on the "sagas" they knew.

We might yet find the *originals* of the gospels, new manuscripts relating to the "Jesus event", records from the Romans, and so on. Maybe some day we will know what really happened.

Most stories made up about some event are told and retold for a while but eventually die out and disappear without a trace. But some flourish and make it into sagas, fairy tales, myths or even religions. We might say that all those stories *evolve* after their first conception. Some stories are successful and crowd out others (the canonical writings constituting the Bible simply crowded out the "apocryphal" ones, for example), some were just too weak and died, even without competition. I'm talking basic evolution here.

- The reason for the survival of the fittest stories is definitely *not* that people liked to know exactly what has happened many years ago. The successful versions are not necessarily the historically most accurate ones. In the early days of competing stories, those versions won that people liked best, or were made to like best by whoever had some coercive power (parents or torturers, for example). Later, after one version won and became "canonical", people don't even know anymore that other versions existed. Nobody tell's them, and this kind of knowledge might have been dangerous, anyway. Paul's version of Christian doctrine, for example, crowded out other ones mostly because it promised salvation for *everybody*. Not just for Jews or some "elite", as taught by competing branches of early Christianity that were actually quite successful in the beginning. On top of that, a good story, retold again and again, provides for entertainment in an approved fashion.

- The gospels, and the stories that go with them, thus show exemplary that within hundred years or less, a real event can sprout several written variants that not only recount it differently but leave out some things that *really* happened and insert *invented* ones. From reading one or several of the available written records, one cannot reconstruct anymore what really has happened. Moreover, the story may by now also have been put in some historical or theological context that the writers and copyists considered to be important. For example, those gospel writers that saw Jesus as Messiah in the Jewish

tradition emphasized his roots to King David and the prophets. To others that was less important. They might have been more concerned about the question if Jesus was only human, only God, a human adopted by some God who lived for a while in his body, both in equal parts, or any other mixture of human and god you can possibly conceive.

Now comes the next step. If telling and retelling "the story" catches on for whatever reasons, one can be sure that follow-up stories appear that are *entirely* invented (just look at today's rainbow press).

- For example, the apocryphal "Infancy gospel of Thomas", written in the first half of the second century, recounts the many and often mischievous miracles done by little Jesus between the age of five and twelve. Of course it is pure invention.

When I visited Coptic churches in Egypt, I found detailed maps and stories about the migrations of the Holy family in Egypt. Nothing of that is mentioned in the Bible. So how do they know? Was Jesus in Egypt at all? What are the facts? We simply don't know for sure.

Completely unconnected things might now be put together. We have, for example, a voluminous correspondence of the apostle Paul with the philosopher *Seneca* - completely faked from the beginning to the end. The idea of the forger was simply to make Paul look more important. If *your* correspondence with the Pope, the Dalai Lhama, the President of the USA, Lady Gaga, or (*insert your choice*) would be "found" after your death, you become a more important person retrospectively too. People will start buying your books / records / whatever you left (or somebody forged for you) and listen more closely to what your followers have to say.

Many more examples like this could be produced from early Christian writings. Most of that stuff was considered to be apocryphal, i.e. highly doubtful, already by the early authorities. Nevertheless, these manuscripts existed.

They were precious to some, read and retold for centuries, and they must have served some purpose.

In short: if you were to read all that we still have today about the "Jesus event", you would be left with a lot of open questions and quite puzzled as to what *really* has happened.

- Now consider what would have happened if there would have been no "church", extending major efforts (including burning the books cum author) to keep writings about the "Jesus event" simple, coherent, and in line with the evolutionary successful doctrine promoted in the "canonized" official writings. It would be a far larger mess! It would be what we know as **clusters of sagas**.

I'm not making this up by the way; all of the above is the well-published view of serious main-stream theology. Part of what I'm saying here comes right from the writings of a colleague of mine from the Faculty of Theology in Kiel. **Bart Ehrmann**, to give just one name, has also written many books about the topic here.

- If you happen to be a believing Christian and feel a bit offended now; I apologize. I don't want to hurt religious feelings - but I'm not just writing for Christians.

Now consider some *other* real event that happened long ago, for example some of the more remarkable (or bloody) doings around some of the major figures during the [migration period](#). Take, for example, [Attila](#) the Hun or [Theoderic](#) the Great. We can be reasonably sure that things happened around these guys that afflicted far more people *directly* then the life and death of Jesus some 500 years before.

- Quite definitely stories about those events were told and retold. Right away very different versions come into being. Those winning a battle with Attila as their leader will tell a different story than the survivors on the losing side. I bet that your Father's or Grandfather's stories about his units heroic deeds against the Germans in WW II are quite different from the way *my* father remembered them.

Written versions may appear, some of which get lost, while others get copied and changed, and the tale moves with the migrating people all over Europe. The written versions that *we* have appear 500 years or so *after* the real event. And no organization akin to "the church" tries to keep just one version in circulation.

It's no wonder that we meet the same basic figures doing some heroic things plus plenty of embellishments in old Irish and Welsh tales, in Norse, Anglo-Saxon and Germanic mythology, and in plenty of others. It's no wonder either that some versions are barely recognizable as having been triggered by the same basic event as the main ("canonized") story.

To make things even more muddled: unlike the gospels, the [North European Sagas](#) do not all go back to just *one* historical incident. They may vaguely recall some really big event (like the wiping out of the Burgundians by the Roman General [Flavius Aëtius](#), commandeering Hun auxiliaries) or just some minor local stuff (the chieftain's son has won a major fight with that fancy sword he got from a traveling salesman, and then abducted and raped the loser's daughter /wife), long since forgotten by all and sundry.

For some reason unknown to us, a tall tale evolved that changed all the time, sprouted new tales, merged with others, incorporated some good stuff from others, split of some parts that weren't politically correct at some time - and so on.

Fragments of older mythology gets mixed in (like fragments of the Old Testament in the New), Odin / Wotan, elves, dwarfs, giants appear and get mixed up with the hero and the event.

It also goes the other way around. When Christianity takes over, the tales get "purged". Old Gods and so on become politically incorrect and disappear. Magical swords don't get their magic from mythical dwarfs or pagan Gods anymore but, like [Joyeuse](#) and [Durendal](#), by containing relics of Saints.

There you have it. As far as I'm concerned, the big dispute among scholars if [Ditrich von Bern](#) mirrors [Theoderic the Great](#) or not, is moot. Of course, there is some Theoderic the Great in there, just as we have some Jesus in the "[Infancy gospel of Thomas](#)". And equally of course there is no way to reconstruct what really happened from the versions we have.

If we wouldn't have *independent* evidence about Theoderic the Great, we wouldn't have a problem. We just would *accept* that the sagas we have do not tell us what really happened, just that something happened that was remarkable enough to get written down eventually and passed on.

Same thing for the [Sigfried / Nibelungen](#) topic and so on. All those sagas created a virtual reality that may have not much to do with what really happened.

So don't puzzle about the historical meaning—just enjoy the story.