

When scholars want to test the 'validity' of an idea, they often check to see how often and whereabouts, the idea appears. If the idea is frequent, and appears across the four Gospels, then it is considered to be more 'authentic'.

Can you explain why they might reach such a conclusion?

The text that has come to be known as 'John's Gospel' (also written anonymously) was written later than Matthew's in a different place for a different audience and social context. In light of Matthew's genealogy, read the extract from Trevor Dennis' book The Christmas stories (pp. 11-12) and consider the following argument between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders in John ch.8:

- ★ Religious leaders: "**We** are descended from Abraham."
- ★ Jesus: "I know **you** are descended from Abraham."
- ★ R.L.: "**Our** Father is Abraham."
- ★ Jesus: "If **you** were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did."
- ★ R.L.: "**We** are not illegitimate...we have one Father: God himself"

What might John be suggesting here?

Does the fact that John also suggests the possibility that Jesus is illegitimate, make it more likely to have been 'true', or at least from a strong source?

Or, could there be another explanation?

What of Paul, Mark and John?

ber of this new family you belong to God's circle. To take your place here, to continue to occupy your place here, you may have to renounce the ties of blood.'

Yet might that difficult scene in Mark 3 reflect something of the reality of Jesus' situation and the difficulties *he* had to face? We cannot be sure, but we notice again that Mark makes no mention of Jesus' human father. Indeed, we will not find one anywhere in his Gospel, and the name of Joseph never appears. Had Joseph died when Jesus was young? Or had he abandoned Mary and her children? Did Jesus grow up in Galilee as a fatherless child? (Luke has a story about Mary and Joseph going with Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem when he is 12, but many scholars do not regard that as historical.) Remembering the description of him in Mark 6.3 as 'the son of Mary', might we suggest that he, unlike his brothers and sisters, was known not to have been Joseph's child? If those last two suggestions are correct, then Jesus' position in his society was indeed precarious. He would not have been regarded by his fellow Jews as a 'son of Abraham', or as a member of the people of God. He would not have been able to marry a 'daughter of Abraham', a legitimate daughter of a Jewish family. In the temple at Jerusalem, he would not have been allowed further than the Court of the Gentiles. In the thinking and practice of the temple authorities, his birth would have put him at a distance from God. It would also have placed him among people who were on the edge of his society, vulnerable, open to exploitation and often exploited, with no place where they could securely belong, and often poor and despised. If we look at the figure of the adult Jesus in any of the four Gospels, that is precisely where we find him. Might his starting a new family among those who shared his own homelessness or were prepared to journey with him to an uncertain destination, might his delighting in his Father God, might his giving his friends a sense of profound belonging and a new dignity as God's beloved children, might all that have stemmed in part from his own childhood, growing up in Galilee as a fatherless child, despised as illegitimate? The New Testament scholar Andries van Aarde thinks so, and

The Christmas Stories

argues his case at length in his book, *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as Child of God*, (2001).

When we come to the birth stories in Matthew and Luke, we must avoid manipulating them to fit this picture, yet neither must we forget it. It may be that it will put some of their details into perspective, and bring a new sense, as well as a new poignancy to their stories.

The notion that Jesus was illegitimate, or was thought by some to be so, is closest to the surface in John's Gospel.

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?'

Jesus answered them '... I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.'

They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does.' They said to him, 'We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me.' (8.31–34, 37–42)

I have italicized the 'we' of the penultimate verse, because in the original Greek of John's text it is plainly emphatic. The whole passage has John's fingerprints all over it. Only in John's Gospel does Jesus speak like this. We hear *John's* voice here. And yet we also hear the voices of people who despise Jesus as illegitimate: 'We are not illegitimate, Jesus, but *you* are.' That is the clear implication of the emphatic 'we' in the Greek. The

What of Paul, Mark and John?

passage may be of John's making, but he has not composed it out of thin air. Presumably he knew of those who claimed that Jesus was illegitimate. He did not make that up. So what are we to make of it? Throw it aside as a wicked slur, cast by those out for Jesus' blood and quite without foundation? Well, we notice that Jesus in this passage does not deny the charge. Instead, he claims that God is his Father, and that is what matters; he comes from God, trailing God's authority, and that overrides all other considerations. It is almost as if he is saying, 'Yes, I may be illegitimate, but that is of no consequence.'

John's Jesus does not defend himself against the charge of illegitimacy by claiming he had a miraculous birth of a virgin mother. That is not what 'having God as his Father' and 'coming from God' mean. In his famous Prologue, the passage that is read as the last lesson in the traditional Nine Lessons and Carols at Christmas, John instead claims that Jesus existed from the beginning of the world as the mind of God, and then 'became flesh and lived among us' (1.14). Nowhere in that passage, nor anywhere else in his Gospel, does John suggest that Jesus' birth took place through anything other than the normal means of conception.

John tells no stories of Jesus' birth. His Prologue stands in their place. After it is ended, he moves straight into the story of John the Baptist's preaching in the desert and his meeting with the adult Jesus. Yet before we move on ourselves, we should remind ourselves of how the Prologue begins: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (1.1).

Near the end of his Gospel, John tells of Thomas being overwhelmed by an encounter with the risen Jesus. He looks at him and says, 'My Lord and my God!' (20.28). Thus John begins and ends his Gospel with bold speech, speaking of Jesus as God, saying that in Jesus we hear the voice of God, in Jesus we see the wounded figure of God. Such daring language is another thing we need to remember when we enter Matthew's and Luke's stories of the birth of Jesus, and when we offer reflections of our own.

But before we do that, let us see what John has to say of Mary. In fact, he does not call her by her name, but marks

