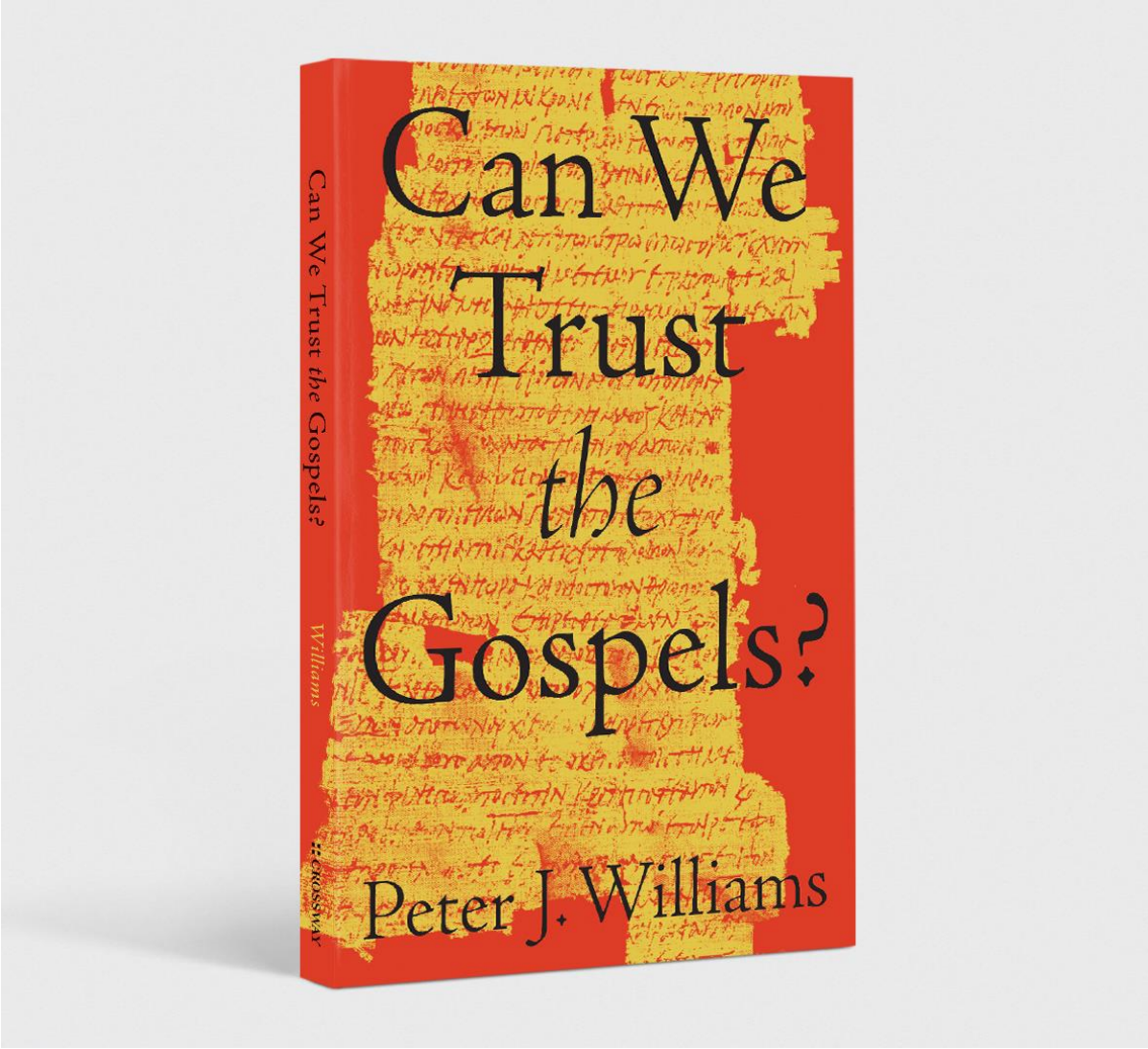




CAN WE TRUST THE GOSPELS?

DR PETER J. WILLIAMS @DRPJWILLIAMS



7 REQUIREMENTS OF THE BOOK

- Short
- Not presupposing any familiarity with gospels
- Not eccentric
- Not divisive
- Not appealing to authority or consensus
- Not introducing to scholarship as an end in itself
- References direct to knowledge sources

OUTLINE

- 1 What Do Non-Christian Sources Say?
- 2 What Are the Four Gospels?
- 3 Did the Gospel Authors Know Their Stuff?
- 4 Undesigned Coincidences
- 5 Do We Have Jesus's Actual Words?
- 6 Has the Text Changed?
- 7 What about Contradictions?
- 8 Who Would Make All This Up?



I. WHAT DO NON-
CHRISTIAN
SOURCES SAY?

WRITINGS OF TACITUS

Short title	Content	Length	Approximate date
Agricola	About Tacitus's father-in-law. Julius Agricola, governor of Britain, including a description of Britain and its people	1 book	AD 98
Germania	A description of Rome's dealings with the Germanic tribes	1 book	AD 98
Histories	A narrative of Roman history covering the years AD 69-96	14 books	AD 109
Annals	A narrative of Roman history covering the years AD 14-68	16 books	AD 115-117

TACITUS, *ANNALS* 15.44

- But neither human help, nor gifts from the emperor, nor all the ways of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order [of Nero]. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd called *Chrestians*.

abolendo tumores ^{varios} natos subdidit pedes. & ^{crudelissim} quatuordecim

neris. Quatuordecim.

nis penis affectu. quos p flagitiorum Inuisos uul

gus christi haec appellat. Quatuor nominis q

Christiana.

christi. Tyberis ^{qui} Imperatorum p puerorum p

Tiberis
pocul pulat

qu p lacrimis supplicis affectu et ^{repressio} q

Impetum. & ^{hinc} uerbilissim ^{cultum} p ^{uoluntate} p ^{uoluntate} p ^{uoluntate} p ^{uoluntate} p ^{uoluntate} p

modo plures ^{colu} originis ^{7 xpi} q maris. s. p urbe ^{7 xpi} q ^{7 xpi} cum

undiq; actioe aua pudenda e flumine celebrari

atq; Ignis pmi ^{7 xpi} coctura q ^{7 xpi} fanae ^{7 xpi} bona. deinde ludi

^{coctura} ¹¹⁰

TACITUS, *ANNALS* 15.44

- Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital [Rome] itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and become fashionable.

SOURCES ATTESTING 'E' FOR CHRIST AND CHRESTIANS

Tacitus, *Codex Laurentianus Mediceus* 68.2

Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 4

Tertullian, *Apology* 3 (Chrestiani)

Lactantius, *Divine Institutions* 4.7 (Chrestus)

No clear majority for /i/ in Christ before fifth century

Vaticanus χρειστιανος, ψευδοχρειστος, αντιχρειστος, χρειστος

Sinaiticus χρηστιανος

Earliest Coptic χρηστιανος

FAMILIARITY LEADS TO ACCURACY

Koran →
Qur'an

Mohammedan
→ Moslem →
Muslim

Chrestian →
Christian

PLINY, *EPISTLES* 10.96

- ...I interrogated them whether they were Christians. If they confessed it I repeated the question a second and a third time, adding the threat of capital punishment. If they still persevered, I ordered them to be led off to execution.

PLINY, *EPISTLES* 10.96

- ... Those who denied that they were, or ever had been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered adoration, with wine and incense, to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose, together with the images of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ—all things it is said that no real Christian can be forced to do—I thought they should be discharged.

PLINY, *EPISTLES* 10.96

- Others who were named by that informer at first confessed themselves Christians, but soon after denied it, saying that they had been, but they had ceased, some three years ago, others many years ago, and a few as much as twenty years ago. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ.

PLINY, *EPISTLES* 10.96

- They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt or error was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, and of singing in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god [*quasi deo*], and of binding themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor to deny a pledge when they were called upon to deliver it up. ...

PLINY, *EPISTLES* 10.96

- **Many persons of all ages and ranks and of both sexes are being and will be called to trial.** For this contagious superstition is not confined only to the cities, but has also spread through the villages and rural districts. It seems possible, however, to check and correct this.

PLINY, *EPISTLES* 10.96

- **It is certain at least that the temples, which had almost become deserted, are now beginning to be visited again; and the sacred rites, after a long interlude, are again being revived. There is a general demand for sacrificial animals, for which up to now only rarely were purchasers found.**

WRITINGS OF JOSEPHUS

Short title	Content	Length	Approximate date
Jewish War	On the Jewish conflict with Rome, AD 66-73	7 books	AD 79
Jewish Antiquities	A history of the Jews, beginning with creation	20 books	AD 93
Life of Josephus	An autobiography focused on the Jewish conflict with Rome	1 book	AD 93
Against Apion	A defense of Judaism, stressing its antiquity	2 books	AD 95

WHAT EARLY SOURCES TELL US

Tacitus: Christus, time of origin, geographical origin, spread, persecution

Pliny: logic of worshipping Emperor as test for Christian. Worshipping Christ *quasi deo*.

Josephus: people close were prepared to die.

Tiberius	Words	Earliest copy	Written
Velleius Paterculus	6,489	C16	30
Tacitus	48,200	C9	After 110
Suetonius	9,310	C9	After 120
Cassius Dio	14,293	C9	After 200
Jesus	Words	Earliest copy	Written?
Matthew	18,347	C2/3	80–90
Mark	11,303	C3	65–70
Luke	19,463	C3	End C1
John	15,445	C2	70–130



DID THE GOSPEL
AUTHORS KNOW
THEIR STUFF?

GOSPEL WRITERS' REFERENCES TO TOWNS

Towns	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Aenon				✓
Arimathea	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bethany	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bethlehem	✓		✓	✓
Bethphage	✓	✓	✓	
Bethsaida	✓	✓	✓	✓
Caesarea Philippi	✓	✓		
Cana				✓
Capernaum	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chorazin	✓		✓	
Dalmanutha		✓		
Emmaus			✓	
Ephraim				✓

Towns	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Gennesaret	✓	✓	✓	
Jericho	✓	✓	✓	
Jerusalem (or Zion)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Magadan	✓			
Nain			✓	
Nazareth	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rama	✓			
Salim				✓
Sidon	✓	✓	✓	
Sychar				✓
Tiberias				✓
Tyre	✓	✓	✓	
Zarephath			✓	

GOSPEL WRITERS' REFERENCES TO REGIONS

Region	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Abilene			✓	
Decapolis	✓	✓		
Egypt	✓			
Galilee	✓	✓	✓	✓
Idumaea		✓		
Ituraea			✓	
Judaea	✓	✓	✓	✓
Naphtali	✓			
Samaria			✓	✓
Sidonia			✓	
Syria	✓		✓	
Trachonitis			✓	
Zebulun	✓			

GOSPEL WRITERS' REFERENCES TO BODIES OF WATER

Body of water	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Bethesda				✓
Kidron				✓
River Jordan	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sea of Galilee	✓	✓		✓
Siloam			✓	✓

GOSPEL WRITERS' REFERENCES TO OTHER PLACES

Other places*	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Field of Blood	✓			
Gabbatha				✓
Gethsemane	✓	✓		
Golgotha/ Place of the Skull	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mount of Olives	✓	✓	✓	
Sheep Gate				✓
Solomon's Colonnade				✓

* I have not included Praetorium mentioned in Matthew, Mark and John, as it is not clearly a proper name.

FREQUENCY OF GEOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Total Greek words*	18,347	11,103	19,463	15,445
Total places (towns, regions, bodies of water, and other places)	90	60	99	76
Locations mentioned per 1,000 words	4.905	5.404	5.087	4.921

* According to *The Greek New Testament*, Produced at Tyndale House, Cambridge (Wheaton IL: Crossway; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), omitting Mark 16:9-20.

JERUSALEM (+750M)

- **Go up** to Jerusalem (Matthew 20:17, 18; Mark 10:32, 33; Luke 2:4, 42; 18:31; 19:28; John 2:13; 5:1; 7:8, 10, 14; 11:55; 12:20)
- **Go down** from Jerusalem (Mark 3:22; Luke 2:51; 18:14)
- “A man was **going down** from Jerusalem to Jericho (−250m), and he fell among robbers.... Now by chance a priest was **going down** that road ...” (Luke 10:30–31)

NAZARETH AND CANA TO CAPERNAUM

Nazareth 350m; Cana >200m; Capernaum –200m

From Nazareth: 'He went down to Capernaum' (Luke 4:31)

From Cana: 'He went down to Capernaum' (John 2:12)

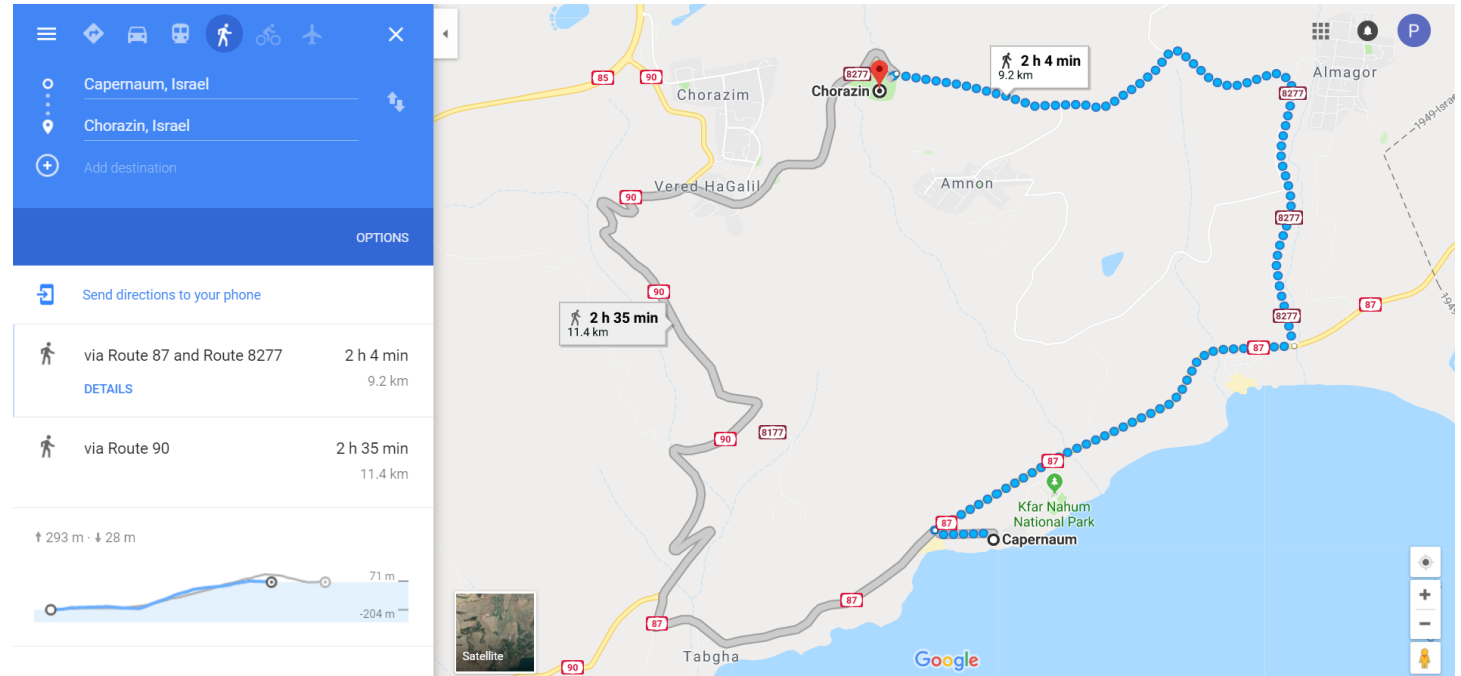
CANA TO CAPERNAUM

- He came again to Cana in Galilee where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. 47 When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to **come down** and heal his son... (4:46–47)
- ‘Sir, **come down** before my child dies’ (4:49)
- ‘And as he was **going down**’ (4:51)

GALILEE CONNECTIONS

- Woe to you, *Chorazin!* Woe to you, *Bethsaida!* For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, *Capernaum*, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. (Luke 10:13–15; cf. Matthew 11:21–23)

GALILEE CONNECTIONS



POSSIBLE SOURCES FOR THE GOSPELS?

- No first-hand acquaintance, not enough info: Strabo (ca. 64 BC–AD 20), Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79), Tacitus (ca. AD 56–117)
- Little first-hand acquaintance, not enough info: Philo (25 BC–AD 50), Ptolemy (d. AD 160)
- First hand acquaintance, not enough info: Josephus (ca. AD 37–100)
- Too late: Babylonian Talmud (ca. AD 500)



TAX SYSTEM

- Matthew and Mark place a whole group of toll collectors in Capernaum (Matthew 9:9–10; Mark 2:14–15)
 - Land border of Galilee (Herod Antipas) and Gaulanitis (Philip)
 - Sea border of Galilee (Herod Antipas) and Decapolis (autonomous Roman cities)
- Luke: Zacchaeus = *chief* toll collector in Jericho (Luke 19:2)
 - Border between Judaea (Pilate) and Peraea (Herod Antipas)





UNDESIGNED COINCIDENCES

TWO SISTERS IN LUKE

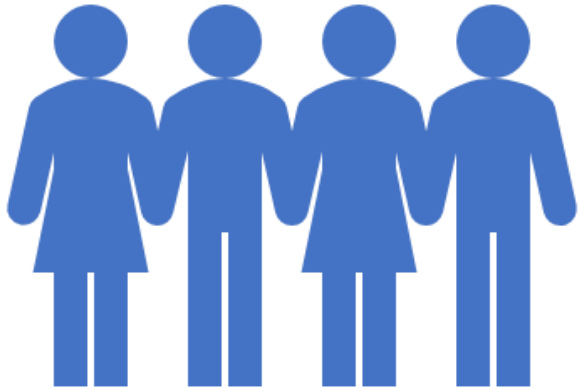
- Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. 40 But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, 42 but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38–42 ESV)

TWO SISTERS IN JOHN

- Martha hears + goes to Jesus / Mary “remained seated” (11:20)
- Martha welcomes
- Martha sends secret message
- Mary gets up quickly / going to weep at tomb? (11:31)
- Mary “fell at his feet” (11:32)
- Jesus saw her weeping (11:33) / no record that Martha wept
- Martha says, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days” (11:39) – practical concern which misses point spiritually

TWO BROTHERS

- James and John = Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17)
- When the disciples James and John saw, they said, “Lord, do you want us to say that fire should come down from heaven to consume them?” (Luke 9:54)



BRINGING TESTS TOGETHER: FEEDING THE 5,000

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- Mark 6:39: green grass; John 6:10: much grass

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FEEDING THE 5,000

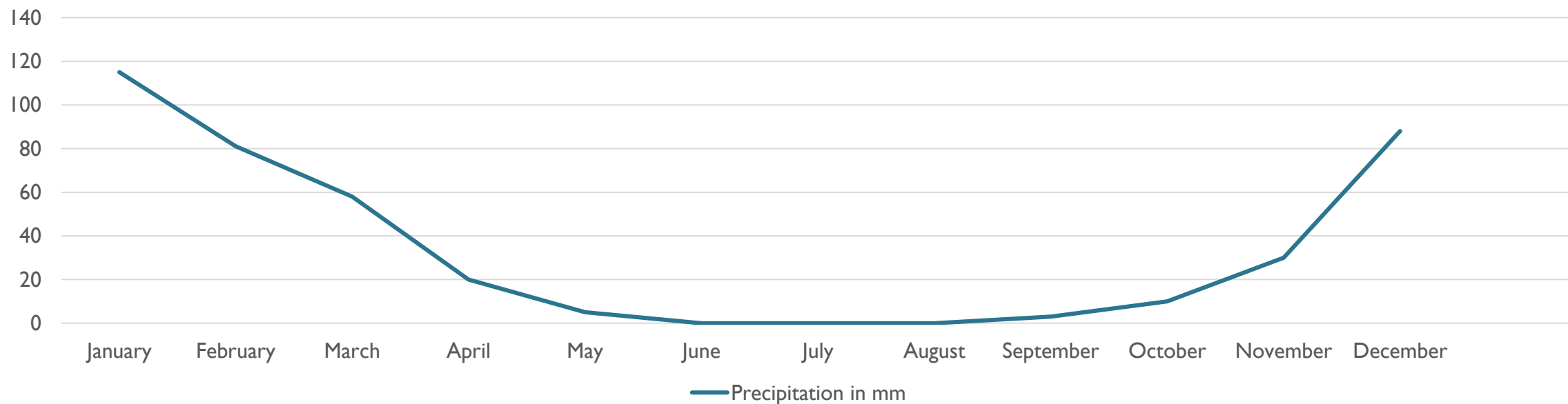
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- John 1:44: Philip and Andrew were from Bethsaida

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- John 6:4: it was Passover time
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- John 6:7–8: Philip and Andrew reply
- Luke 9:10: Feeding was near Bethsaida
- John 1:44: Philip and Andrew were from Bethsaida
- John 6:9: barley loaves

TIBERIAS PRECIPITATION

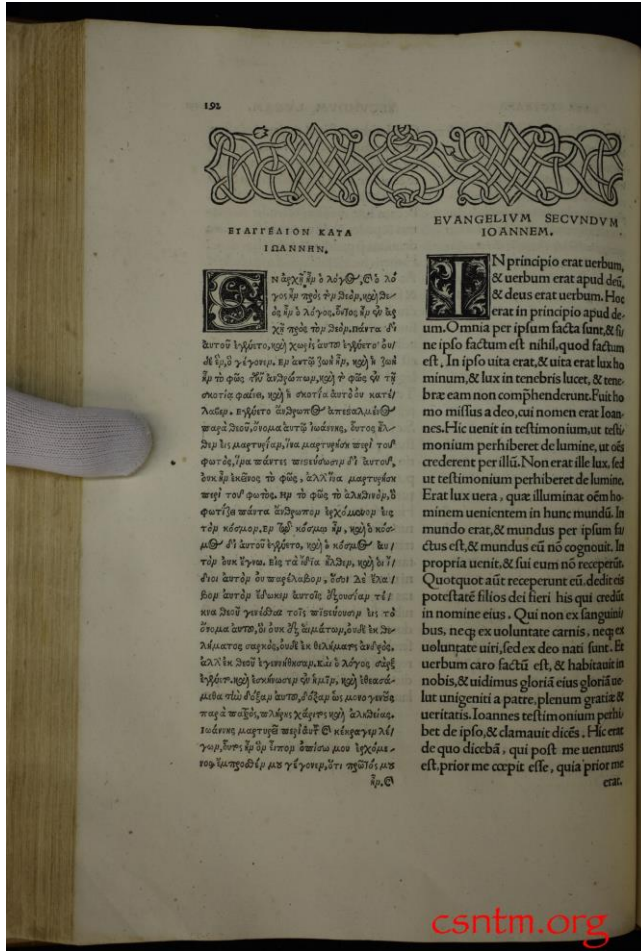
Precipitation in millimetres



* Data from en.climate-data.org/location/28706, accessed 14 March 2018

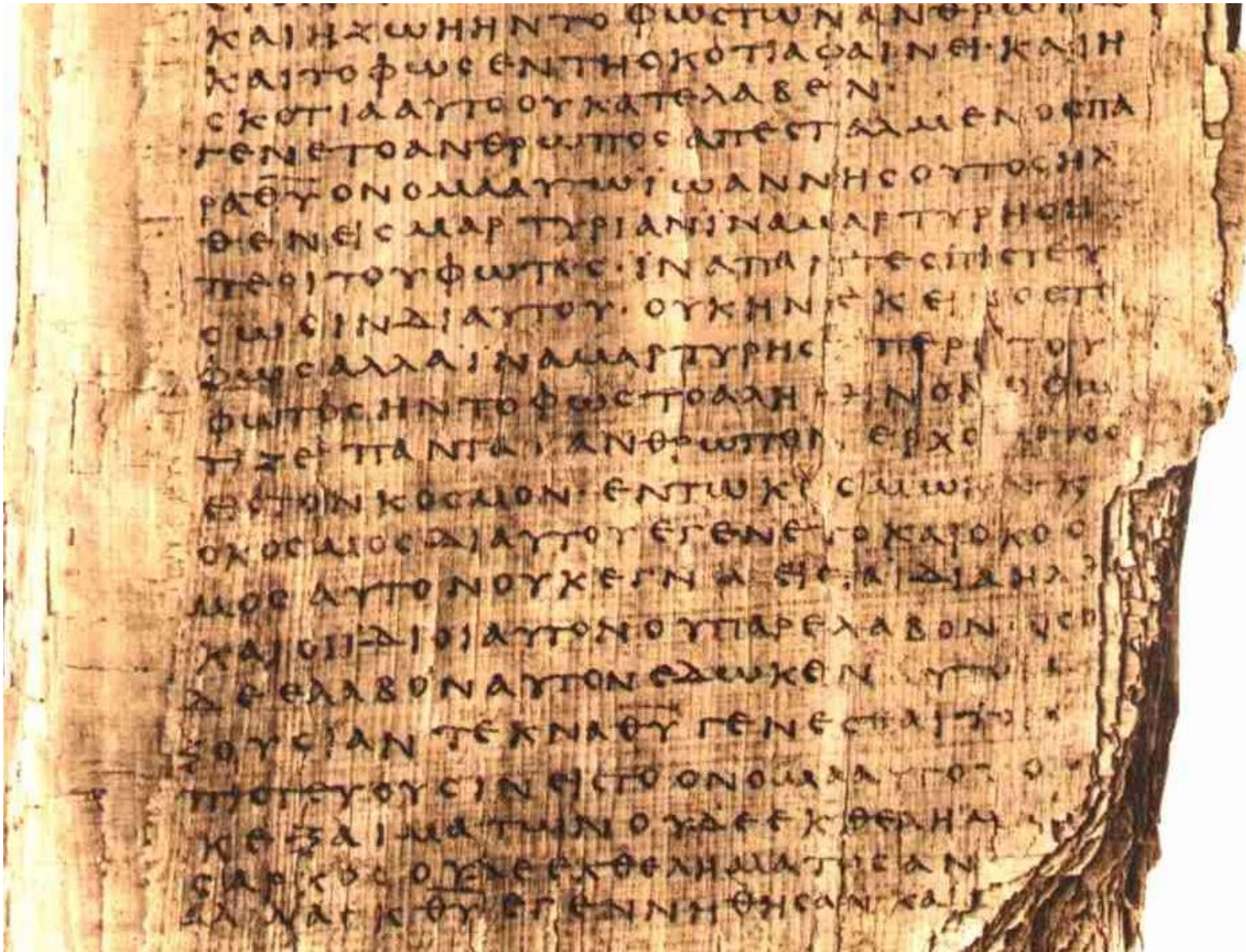


**HAS THE TEXT
CHANGED?**



csntm.org

IN 1516 ERASMUS HAD 12TH CENTURY MANUSCRIPTS



IN GENEVA: P66



IN GENEVA: P66

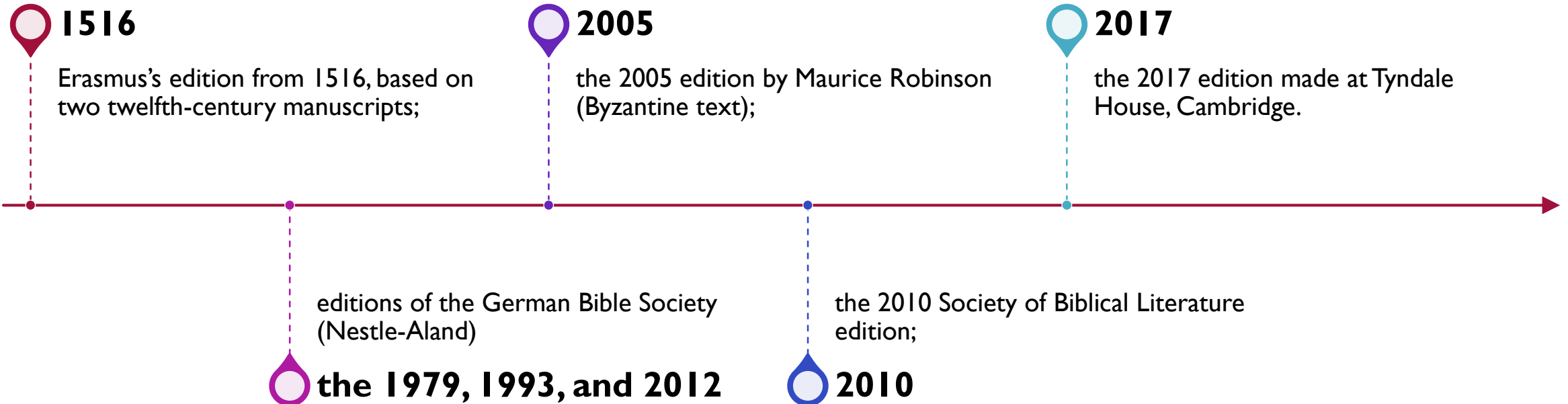
JOHN 1:1-14

188 words

812 letters

Tyndale
House
edition 2017

IDENTICAL FOR FIRST 14 VERSES OF JOHN





**WHO WOULD
MAKE THIS ALL UP?**



QUESTIONS?

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