

Can we trust the Gospels?

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1. Who wrote the Gospels?

Christians claim that the Gospels were written by men who were either eyewitnesses or based their accounts on what eyewitnesses told them. There is a strong historical case for this claim.

a. The writers of the Gospels claimed eyewitness authority

This is explicit in Luke and John (see below) and implicit in all four Gospels which include rich details only an eye witness could have known.

Luke's statement on how he composed his gospel in Luke 1:1-4:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

John's statement in John 21:24-25

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

b. The names we use were recognised from an early date

The traditional names of the four biblical Gospels have a long history from at least the time of Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202, *Against Heretics* III. Preface.1). Earlier writer Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) simply referred to "memoirs" of the apostles without naming them. Other so-called 'Gospels' that were not included in the New Testament are sometimes named for biblical characters (e.g., Thomas) but are clearly later.

An early Christian historian, Eusebius (c. 260–265 – 30 May 339, Caesarea Maritima, Syria Palaestina, Roman Empire), referred to a now lost source from Papias (ca. 60-134/8) and argued that the authors of the four gospels were:

- **Matthew**, a tax collector from Capernaum (Matthew 9:9; 10:3), and one of the Twelve.
- **Mark**, apostle Peter's interpreter in Rome – possibly eyewitness to some things, but early second century writer Papias says he got his information from Peter. Generally identified as John Mark – mother, Mary, had property in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12); cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10), who was from Cyprus (Acts 4:36).

- **Luke**, a medical doctor (Colossians 4:14) who accompanied Paul on some of his travels round the Mediterranean and possibly a Gentile.
- **John** son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve – younger brother of James and fisherman from Capernaum.

Eusebius states this at this point because followers of Marcion (c. 80-160) were rejecting the Gospels except for an edited version of Luke. That was because Marcion rejected the Old Testament as the word of God and the Gospels are saturated with Old Testament references.

Peter Simpson summarises the strength of support from tradition for the traditionally claimed authorship of the four Gospels:¹

Eusebius [...] repeats and confirms the tradition as we know it from other and earlier writers [...] the external evidence for the tradition about the Gospels (Matthew first, Mark and Luke close second and third, John fourth) is solid, unanimous, and historically unimpeachable. It can fairly be said that, on the basis of the external evidence, the supposition of Markan priority was exploded before, during, and after its invention. If scholars still cling to Markan priority (as many do), the reason cannot be anything historical, for history is solidly against such priority. [...] The historical evidence for the authenticity and authorship of the Gospels has been summarized by many authors. The Catholic Commentary mentions, in order: Papias (in Eusebius), Irenaeus, Justin, the Old Latin Prologues, the Muratorian Canon, Tertullian, Clement, Origen, Tatian.

c. There is a strong historical case that these are eyewitness testimony

- They are clearly Jewish* – no one disputes this and it is clear from their Old Testament knowledge and awareness of Jewish customs. This also means they must be early in Christian history, before Christianity became predominantly Gentile.
- Even the latest dates for the Gospels place them all in the first century* – and the only reason to date them after AD 70 would be if we do not think Jesus could have predicted the destruction of the Temple which happened that year.
- There are plausible reasons for these four authors writing in this order:*
 - Matthew, one of the Twelve, had the skills to write a record from role as he was a tax collector. His Gospel included details that suggest he was writing for the predominantly Jewish earliest believers.
 - Luke was a companion of Paul and perhaps a Gentile. He was creating an account for Gentile background believers who had been reached through Paul's mission.
 - Mark, who was a relative of Peter, was basing his Gospel on Peter's preaching, possibly when Peter was in Rome and persecution was becoming likely.
 - John wrote later faced with new challenges. As the last surviving apostle he had a uniquely intimate perspective, allowing him to include extra details about Jesus' earlier ministry, explaining why his Gospel covers three years with Jesus while the others only cover one year.
- If not these four people, then who?* There is no tradition attributing these books to anyone other than the traditional authors.

¹ Peter Simpson. *The Authenticity of the Gospels* (pre-publication draft, 2019), p.39,40.

v. *Why make these authors up?* To say these were not the actual authors, we need to have a reason why these names would have been chosen. That would make sense with Matthew and John, who were apostles, but hardly with Mark and Luke. Peter J. Williams expresses this point well: “Since neither Mark nor Luke was an eyewitness, it is hard to see a motive for anyone to attach their names to the Gospels unless they were the real authors”.²

d. There is no coherent counter-argument

The case against the traditional authorship of the Gospels arose from the 1600s onwards. It assumes that the writers of the Gospels copied from one another and drew on an original source that was wrong. But there is no historical basis for these claims. We should ask ourselves, if we cannot trust sources written within a few decades of the events, why should we trust critics judging them 2000 years after the events?

The reason for the arguments against the traditional authorship is mainly based on rejection of the supernatural claims in the Gospels – the virgin birth, miracles and resurrection. But a fair analysis must conclude that the accounts were written very early. Ex-Christian and sceptic, Bart Ehrman, reaches this conclusion:³

the oldest and best sources we have for knowing about the life of Jesus . . . are the four Gospels of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This is not simply the view of Christian historians who have a high opinion of the New Testament and its historical worth; it is the view of all serious historians of antiquity of every kind, from committed evangelical Christians to hardcore atheists.

2. Is there any corroboration for the Gospels?

We can test the idea that the Gospels are historically accurate by looking for internal and external corroboration. We find strong internal corroboration and considerable external support for key details.

a. Internal Corroboration

The fact we have four complementary Gospels is helpful means we can compare the four to see if they are in agreement. We might ask if we would be more likely to believe the stories about Jesus if we had only one account from one author (like the Qur’an).

Some events are recounted in more than one Gospel with some variation in details. Similarities of this kind could arise through copying from one another or from a lost original source. But there are also other signs that the writers were describing people and events they knew about directly from eyewitnesses. These are passages where a different event is being described but it is clear that the same person is in view.

We can all this corroboration from undesigned coincidences. Examples include:

- Mary and Martha have the same personalities (activist v contemplative) in Luke 10 and John 11.
- James and John are called ‘sons of thunder’ in Mark 3:17 and the character that explains this nickname is seen in their words in Luke 9 without the nickname.

² Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), p.43.

³ Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.102.

- Jesus singles Philip out in John 6:4 with a question about where to buy bread for the 5000 and John 1:44 says he came from Bethsaida. Luke 9:10 tells us that the miracle of feeding the 5000 occurred close to Bethsaida.

Someone might argue that there are many contradictions between the Gospels, but these can largely be explained easily as results of incompleteness in the accounts. It is possible to synthesise the events recounted in the Gospels into a single account. In fact, this was first done very early in the *Diatessaron* by Tatian written around AD173, probably in Syria). Other apparent contradictions arise from deliberate uses of language by an author or Jesus in ways that superficially seem contradictory.

b. External Corroboration

The biblical Gospels show detailed knowledge of first century Jewish culture and of the geography of the region Jesus lived in (the later so-called 'Gospels' do not). Examples include:

- *Awareness of customs* – e.g., Corban in Matt 27:6 and Mark 7:11; singing hymn on Passover night; high priest tearing clothes when thinks Jesus has blasphemed.
- *Use of language* (especially Aramaic words like Hosanna) with the correct meaning for the time.
- *Frequency of people's names and disambiguators*. Considering Matthew 10:2-4, Richard Bauckham adds the frequencies with which names appear in Jewish documents from the first century in brackets:

The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon [1], who is called Peter, and Andrew [>99] his brother; James [11] the son of Zebedee, and John [5] his brother; Philip [61=] and Bartholomew [50=]; Thomas [>99] and Matthew [9] the tax collector; James [11] the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus [39=]; Simon [1] the Zealot, and Judas [4] Iscariot, who betrayed him.

It is notable that the writer uses additional explanations to disambiguate all the common names but not the less common ones. Without these readers in the first century might be asking, 'Which Simon? Which Judas?', but they are less likely to have asked, 'Which Thomas? Which Bartholomew?'.

- *Naming familiar and obscure places and their relationships*. The accounts name small settlements as well as major ones and when they describe distances or directions between places they are accurate.
- *Archaeology confirms details*. Examples include:
 - locations of the pools of Bethesda and Siloam on north and south sides of Temple precincts;
 - Pilate as prefect (not confirmed until an inscription was found in the 1960s);
 - nails in ankles in first century crucifixion (confirmed in an ossuary discovered in 1968);
 - Caiaphas as High Priest (his tomb was found in the 1990s).
- *Non-Christian writers*. It is not surprising that our main sources for the life of Jesus are Christian or that we have relatively few non-Christian sources from early dates as Christianity took time to grow to a size that caught the attention of many people. We do, however, have some early non-Christian accounts that fit perfectly with what the Gospels say:
 - Cornelius Tacitus (b. c.AD 56; official in Rome) called Christianity a 'disease';
 - Pliny the Younger (b. AD 61/62), governor of Bithynia and Pontus (in the northwest of modern Turkey), in around 109 to 111 wrote a letter to Trajan (emperor 98-117) asking him how to deal with Christians (epistles 10.96);

- Flavius Josephus (AD 37/38 – after AD 100), a commander of Jewish forces in Galilee during the rebellion of AD 67, and later a citizen of Rome, where he wrote, refers to some details.

Taken together, these sources confirm that Jesus:

- Existed as a Jew in first third of first century in Roman province of Judaea.
- Was born out of wedlock.
- Gathered disciples – five are named (sometimes garbled).
- Ran afoul of prevailing legal interpretations of controversial topics.
- Intersected with John the baptiser.
- Claimed to be the Jewish Messiah (known by title ‘Christ’).
- Was said to have performed ‘wondrous feats’ (Josephus)
- Was eventually arrested and crucified under Pontius Pilate (26-36 AD).
- Was worshipped as God by Christians who claimed he was raised from the dead.

Scholar Craig Blomberg says this is about as much as we would expect when history was almost entirely about wars and conquest, kings and emperors and other official leaders.

- *The historic case for the resurrection is strong and could be tested.* This argument is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is also worth considering.

3. Are the Gospels reliable?

It makes sense to believe that the Gospels were written early by people who were eyewitnesses, but is it possible that the writers were mistaken and do we have what they originally wrote?

a. Were the authors accurate?

The Gospels were written within 30 to 60 years of the events. That seems long to us, but it is not compared to other ancient texts. For example, Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, but the oldest surviving records we have of his life are biographical snippets from the first century, and the primary writers about him come from the end of the first and early second centuries AD. That is 400 years after his life. So, the Gospels are actually quite close in date to the events.

We might still argue that several decades is plenty of time for the accounts to be distorted. But it is plausible to think that the traditions were handed on faithfully. Consider the following:

- 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 speaks of tradition handed on to Paul which he was handing on. This is one of the earliest Christian texts, written in AD 53-54. Paul is writing about things passed on to him probably about three years after Jesus’ death. So, there was already a fixed oral tradition by that time.
- The overlap between the Gospels suggests that oral traditions were passed on reliably. Changed words can be understood as additions by author for explanatory purposes in the age before our conventions of speech marks and brackets.
- In Jewish culture it was common for lengthy Scriptures to be memorised.

- There were also social memories held in churches who lived by these stories and were sensitive to changes. They would have noticed if the writings did not match the stories they treasured.

So, it makes sense to say there was an early and strong oral tradition. But Luke also mentions pre-existing written sources that were available to him.

A final point to consider is how clearly we can remember major events. We may forget details, but an experience like meeting the resurrected Jesus is hardly something we would forget.

b. Do we have what they wrote?

The four biblical Gospels have been collected together since very early. Irenaeus of Lyons refers to the “four-formed Gospel” in around AD 185.⁴ One of the earliest surviving manuscripts containing the four Gospels (along with Acts) is Papyrus 45 in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, which originates from southern Egypt sometime around the first half of the third century.

Between the writing of the Gospels and their collection together there was no opportunity to alter them without the changes being detected. Christianity spread rapidly, with significant numbers in Rome by AD 64 according to the hostile official Tacitus. These communities all had their memories of the stories and their copies of the Gospels. No centralised power could control their content.

This explains why we have so many manuscripts (early handwritten copies) of the Gospels. And when we compare these, we find very few differences. Peter J. Williams summarises the strength of manuscript evidence:⁵

In terms of sheer volume of manuscripts in different languages, the Gospels, or perhaps the biblical Psalms, are the best documented texts from antiquity by some margin. They are also arguably the most scrutinized texts.

Only 49 verses of nearly 3800 (that is 1.2%) in the Gospels are disputed (i.e., there is good reason to question whether they are original) when we compare the 2000 manuscripts discovered since verses were assigned in Paris by Robert Estienne in 1551. These are all noted in footnotes of modern translations. These are:

- two passages are probably not original: Mark 16:9-20 (22 verses) and John 7:53–8:11 (12 verses);
- some single verses are probably later additions: Matthew 17:21; 18:11; 23:14; Mark 7:16; 9:44; 9:46; 11:26; 15:28; Luke 17:36; John 5:3b–4;
- four other verses were questioned but are now generally believed to be original: Matthew 16:2b–3, Luke 22:43–44, and Luke 23:34a.

As Craig Blomberg says, “Less than one percent of what we call the New Testament is, in any significant degree, questioned [...] They can be read, and people can see that no doctrine or any practice of Christianity depends on any disputed text”.⁶

Besides the manuscripts of the Gospels, we also have many quotations from the Gospels in early Christian writer.

⁴ *Against Heresies* III.11.8

⁵ Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), p.111.

⁶ Craig Blomberg on [YouTube](#) (author of *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, IVP, 1987).

Thomas Horne summarises the evidence that we have the Gospels as originally written:⁷

The contents of the several books are precisely the same now as they were in the first two centuries; to which fact we may add that the multiplication of copies, which were read both in public and in private, the reverence of the Christians for these writings, the silence of their acutest enemies, who would most assuredly have charged them with the attempt [to alter them] if it had been made, and the agreement of all the manuscripts and versions extant, are all so many proofs of the integrity and incorruptness of the New Testament; which are further attested by the agreement with it of all the quotations from it which occur in the writings of Christians from the earliest age to the present times.

4. Why were the Gospels written?

Having established that it makes sense to accept that the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses and that we have what they originally wrote, we can ask why they were writing. Luke's opening statement claims that he was writing to ensure an accurate record. But it is also clear that the writers wanted their readers to believe in Jesus. John is most explicit about this in his statement in John 20:30-31:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Someone might argue that any account written by a believer is inevitably biased, but we must consider whether the writers of the Gospels were intending to deceive their readers or to persuade them of things they believed to be true.

a. Were they writing to deceive?

Christianity teaches and expects a strong ethic of honesty. So, if the Gospel writers were setting out intentionally to deceive people it would contradict everything they taught and undermine the faith. That does not prove they were not lying, but it should cause us to pause before jumping to that conclusion. We can test the idea that these writers were lying using the three classic tests from crime dramas: motive, means and opportunity.

• **Motive? What did they stand to gain?**

The first Christians had nothing material to gain from lying about Jesus. In fact many of the eyewitnesses were willing to die for their claims about Jesus. This included James, the brother of Jesus, according to non-Christian historian Josephus. He describes the killing of James, "brother of Jesus who was called the Christ", by High Priest Ananus in AD 62 (when Josephus was living in Jerusalem). He explains that this Jewish leader took advantage of the gap between governors. So, we have independent testimony to a family member of Jesus' who was a believer in his brother as God!

• **Means? Why did they claim such difficult things to believe?**

⁷ Horne, Thomas. H. *A Summary of the Evidence for the Genuineness, Authenticity etc. of the Holy Scriptures*. Longman, Green, and Roberts: London, 1861. p. 451.

If these writers wanted to deceive people, they would try to make their accounts as believable and themselves as credible as possible. So, why would they include things that would more conveniently be left out or changed, including:

- The regular confusion among the disciples and denial by their leader, Peter.
- The hard sayings of Jesus (sayings that shock without considerable explanation) – e.g., the call to hate parents to follow him (Luke 14:26) compared to the easier parallel in Matthew (love more).
- Jesus' lack of knowledge of date of his return, which seems to contradict the claim that he is God.
- Jesus' death by crucifixion, which was shameful to Romans and a sign of God's curse for Jews.
- The resurrection of one man ahead of the final resurrection of all people, which was not expected in Judaism and not well received by Gentiles (Acts 17).

We can also ask why men who wanted to deceive others would leave out things that were very important for early Christians, such as:

- Any statement from Jesus that circumcision was no longer necessary among His followers – this is a major issue for the early Christians in Acts and Galatians.
- Any reference to speaking in tongues – this was a major issue in Corinth.

If the Gospel writers were setting out to deceive people, they did a poor job of it!

- **Opportunity? When could they have done it?**

As already said before, it would have been impossible to create a conspiracy that would be believed across the decentralised, widespread church. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul encourages his readers to check out what he says with many eyewitnesses who were still alive at the time.

b. Were they writing to persuade?

If the writers were not intentionally deceiving people, they were writing to persuade people of what they really believed to be true. We see this in their purpose statements. It is true that these writers were biased, in the sense that they were convinced and trying to convince others, but bias does not always mean dishonesty. Consider an innocent person accused of a crime or a doctor persuading a patient. They would do everything they could to persuade others of the truth.

If someone insists that they cannot take the Gospel accounts seriously because of bias in the writers, it only raises another question. May their rejection of the Gospels also be based on bias? For example, have they assumed that old means irrelevant, do they find miracles and resurrection hard to believe, or do they find the challenge of the Gospels inconvenient?

The Gospels do aim to persuade us, but they do it in a particular way. Not through deeply reasoned arguments, but by telling us what happened with limited explanatory comments (there are more comments in John than others, but his comments are still mostly explanatory). This suggests historical constraint on the part of the authors. They allowed the reader draw his or her own conclusion. They believed the truth spoke for itself.

And history shows they were right. Many people believed their accounts. Indisputably, the teachings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels had a massive impact in history. What best explains this? There are two options:

- Later people made these things up and managed to persuade all Christians in multiple places all at once that they were true records of the Jesus they were already worshipping. They were so skilful that even modern scholars cannot see that the accounts are not original.
- Jesus really was so great that people who knew him and whose lives were changed were determined to spread his message and to create a faithful record of his life and teaching for future generations.

Which do you find more plausible? Which do you believe?

5. What difference does trusting the Gospels make?

The evidence for the historic Jesus is strong. Peter J. Williams expresses it well:⁸

even though Jesus was on the periphery of the Roman Empire, we have as many early sources about his life and teaching as we have about activities and conversations of Tiberius, emperor during Jesus's public activities [...] Jesus has more extended text about him, in generally closer proximity to his life, than his contemporary Tiberius, the most famous person in the then-known world.

If the Gospels are reliable, then we need to take Jesus seriously. If the Gospels are true and we come to believe them, then it makes all the difference. Look at the difference the Gospels have made to society. Is it not good? Look at the difference they have made in the lives of people you know who believe them? Is it not good? What difference would it make to you personally if you believed the Gospels and the Jesus they present?

⁸ Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), p.39-40, 41.