

CAN WE TRUST THE GOSPELS?

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WHAT DO NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES SAY?

TACITUS (A.D. 55 -W 120)

According to the Oxford Companion of Classical Literature, “The Annals in particular show Tacitus to have been one of the greatest of historians, with a penetrating insight into character and a sober grasp of the significant issues of the time.”

From the Annals XV.44.2-8, Tacitus confirms six details from the Gospels and the New Testament:

1. The public career of Christ occurred in the time of the emperor Tiberius (Luke 3:1).
2. Christ died under the authority of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea (Matthew 27:2; Mark 15:1; Luke 23:1; John 18:28-29).
3. Christ was executed as a criminal (Luke 23:2).
4. This occurred in Judea (Mark 10:33).
5. The movement did not die with Jesus, but “broke out” again.
6. The movement spread from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 1:4 and 28:14).

PLINY THE YOUNGER (A.D. 61 - 111)

Pliny was governor of Bithynia and Pontus (northwest Turkey) around 109 to 111. During that time, he wrote several letters to emperor Trajan. In his most famous letter to Trajan, he asks for advice on how to deal with Christians (*Epistles* 10.96). From this letter we learn the following:

1. There were large numbers of Christians in his region (early second century).
2. These Christians worshipped Christ (and only Christ) as God.

JOSEPHUS (A.D. 37 – C. 100)

Josephus was a commander of the Jewish forces in Galilee during the beginning of the rebellion against Rome in 66. In 67 he was captured by the Romans and later became a Roman citizen. Josephus is the most important historian for events in first century Palestine.

In *Antiquities* 20.197-203, Josephus confirms two details from the New Testament:

1. Jesus was “called Christ” (Acts 2:36).
2. Jesus had a brother called James (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19).

WHAT ARE THE FOUR GOSPELS?

“... 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.”[1]

AN OVERVIEW OF THE GOSPELS

1. The four traditional authors:
 - Matthew, a tax collector from Capernaum (Matthew 9:9; 10:3), was one of the twelve disciples.
 - Mark, not one of the Twelve, was Peter’s interpreter in Rome.
 - Luke, not one of the Twelve, was a companion of Paul on his missionary journeys.
 - John, son of Zebedee, was one of the Twelve, the younger son of James, and a fisherman from Capernaum.
2. The Gospels, unlike modern biographies, focused disproportionately on the final week of Jesus’ life, his death and resurrection.
3. The Gospels contain historical narrative and Jesus’ teaching. They also give theological perspective and seek to convince the reading believe that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world.
4. Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the Synoptic Gospels) are more similar to each other than they are to John.
5. The four Gospels represent at least five independent sources of material.

FOUR IS A LOT

The amount of text we have about Jesus is good relative to one of the best-known figures from antiquity, Tiberius, the roman emperor and Jesus’ contemporary.[2] Each has four main sources, containing a comparable amount of text. In the main, the Gospels were likely written earlier and have much earlier extant copies.

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

2. Peter Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 39-42.

WHY THESE FOUR?

1. By the year 250, the four Gospels were attested by the church over a wide geographical area:
 - Papyrus 45, in the Chester Beatty Library, contains the four Gospels and the book of Acts and was produced in Egypt around 250.
 - Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon, France, wrote about the fourfold Gospel (referring to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) around the year 185.
 - Tatian produced a harmony of the four Gospels, known as the Diatessaron, in Syria around the year 173.
2. Other writings that purport to be Gospels (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas) are clearly secondary writings of a later origin and different character from the four canonical Gospels.

THE PROCESS OF CANONIZATION

1. God inspired certain books.
2. These books were recognized by the people of God as inspired by God.
3. These books were collected and preserved by the people of God.

THE CRITERIA OF CANONIZATION (THREE BASIC PRINCIPALS)

1. Authority – Who wrote the book?
2. Authenticity – Does the book tell the truth?
3. Acceptance – Was the book widely accepted by the church?

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

1. The selection process: 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 3:17; 2 Peter 1:16; 1 John 1:3
2. The tradition of reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:27; Colossians 4:16; Revelation 1:3
3. The circulation and collection process: Revelation 1:11; 1 Peter 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 3:15-16; 1 Timothy 5:18

DID THE GOSPEL AUTHORS KNOW THEIR STUFF?

The Gospel authors show a familiarity with the time and places that they wrote about that is difficult to explain unless they were eyewitnesses themselves or were faithfully recording eyewitness testimony.

GEOGRAPHY

1. All four authors show knowledge of a range of locations from the well known, to lesser known, to the obscure.
2. Each writer shows a level of independence from the others as each brings unique information.
3. All the Gospel writers show a variety of types of geographical information (Cities, towns, villages, regions, gardens, bodies of water, travel routes, etc.).

NAMES OF PEOPLE

1. The names of people mentioned in the Gospels are consistent with the known naming patterns among Jews in Palestine in the first century. Naming patterns were quite different in the different parts of the Roman empire.
2. Extra descriptors are used with the most common names (e.g. Simon – see Mark 3:16, 3:18, 14:3, 15:21) and not with the less common names (e.g. Philip).
3. Since people's names are often among the most difficult details to remember, accuracy in recounting people's names demonstrates the high quality of the testimony contained in the Gospels.

JEWISHNESS

1. The Jewishness of the Gospels reflect an early date (before AD 70) of composition.

UNDESIGNED COINCIDENCES

“An undesigned coincidence is a notable connection between two or more accounts or texts that doesn't seem to have been planned by the person or people giving the accounts. Despite their apparent independence, the items fit together like pieces of a puzzle.”^[1]

1. Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard, 2017), 17-18.

TWO SISTERS

Compare Luke 10:38-42 and John 11:1-46, two different narratives about two different events. How do these two accounts accord with each other regarding the personalities of Martha and Mary?

TWO BROTHERS

Compare Mark 3:17 and Luke 9:51-55. How does Luke explain the nickname given in Mark to the brothers James and John?

GREEN GRASS

Compare Mark 6:30-44 and John 6:15. How does John explain that the grass was green, a detail only given by Mark (6:39)? (Hint: see John 6:4.)

DO WE HAVE JESUS' ACTUAL WORDS?

“Arguably, we have greater knowledge of what Jesus said than of sayings from any other ancient person who did not write a book.”^[1] But can we be sure that what is recorded are Jesus' actual words?

QUOTATION AND MEMORIZATION

1. Ancient historians took great care to accurately record the gist of speeches, not necessarily the exact words.^[2]
2. History is not just a static series of events. Recorded history presents and explains what has happened. Understanding of past events often increases with the passage of time and in light of subsequent events.
3. First century Judaism highly valued memorization of the teaching of Rabbis. Jesus' disciples would surely have memorized large portions of his teaching.
4. What the Gospels show is that their authors carefully recorded Jesus' very voice (*ipsissima vox*), not necessarily his very words (*ipsissima verba*).

“NO ONE EVER SPOKE LIKE THIS MAN!”

It is much simpler to suppose that one genius (Jesus) came up with extraordinary teaching than to suggest that multiple authors had brilliant ideas and all of them independently attributed them to Jesus.

PARABLES

More parables are attributed to Jesus than to any other ancient Rabbi. Parables are a uniquely Jewish genre and fit within the period after the Old Testament and before the church became largely gentile. Few parables were used by early Christians outside the New Testament. Some of Jesus parables are viewed as masterpieces of composition. Again, it is far more natural to attribute the parables in the Gospels to Jesus himself rather than later Christian authors.

THE SON OF MAN

The Son of Man was Jesus' favorite form of self-reference. It is found in all five main sources: unique to Matthew (13:41), unique to Luke (18:8), Matthew-Luke (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58), Matthew-Mark-Luke (Matthew 9:6; Mark 2:10; Luke 5:24), and John (1:51). Since it was not an established title for Messiah in Judaism in Jesus' time and it not subsequently used by the church, except to quote the Gospels, it is most natural to attribute this reference to Jesus himself. As to its significance, see Daniel 7:13-14.

1. Peter Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 97.

2. See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.1.

JOHN AND THE SYNOPTICS

1. Matthew 11:25-27 sounds very much like the language Jesus uses in John 10:15 and 17:25, speaking of his unique relationship to the Father.
2. John and the Synoptics attest to Jesus of the title “the Son of Man” as a self-reference.
3. Matthew 28:9-10 and John 20:17 show the convergence of details relating to the women’s first encounter with the risen Lord.

LOST IN TRANSLATION?

The idea that Jesus’ teaching was lost or corrupted when it was translated from Aramaic (widely believed to be the language that Jesus regularly or exclusively used to teach) is a red herring. First, correct translation is far more likely than mistranslation. Second, it is very likely that Jesus was multilingual, knowing at least Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, using all three as the occasion required.

WHY WAS JESUS KILLED?

If Jesus did not make the bold claims recorded in the Gospels but was merely a sage and teller of parables, why was he killed?

HAS THE TEXT CHANGED?

That the Gospel texts have been reliably handed down to us is supported by the following arguments:

1. Most of our Gospel manuscripts countries come from outside Palestine, such as, Egypt, Italy, Greece, and Turkey. It is highly unlikely that scribes from these countries were able to introduce accurate Jewish cultural knowledge into the Gospels.
2. Most of our knowledge of classical Greece and Rome comes to us through manuscripts from the 9th through the 16th centuries, produced by Christian scribes. This is questioned by no one.
3. Erasmus produced the first printed edition of the New Testament in Greek in 1516. For the Gospels he relied on only two manuscripts which date from the 11th century. Since that time, around a couple thousand more Greek manuscripts of the Gospel have been discovered, some from as early as the second century. The resulting change in the text is relatively small. None overturn or change any essential Christian doctrine.
 - a. Verses called into doubt since Erasmus' Greek New Testament was published: Mark 16:9-20; John 7:52-8:11; Matthew 17:21; Matthew 18:11; Matthew 23:14; Mark 7:16; Mark 9:44 & 46; Mark 11:26; Mark 15:28; Luke 17:36; Luke 23:17; John 5:3b-4, for a total of 35 verses, out of 3771.
 - b. Erasmus himself knew that at least 27 of these 35 verses were doubtful.
4. The fact that the manuscripts do vary shows that there was no central authority that could impose uniformity, squelch debate, or control doctrine.
5. While there are many variant readings among the many Gospel manuscripts, the vast majority of variants do not change meaning of the text.
6. By carefully comparing the manuscripts and analyzing the variants the original text can be approximated with an error of less that one percent.

LOST IN TRANSLATION?

WHAT ABOUT CONTRADICTIONS?

1. The fact that the Gospels contain apparent discrepancies and contradictions suggests a degree of independence within each account. This argues rather for the authenticity of the accounts.
2. Most alleged contradictions are the result of shallow reading or misinterpretation of the text. Consider the following examples from Bart Ehrman:
 - a. “In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is not interested in teaching about himself. But when you read John’s Gospel, that’s virtually the only thing Jesus talks about is who he is, what his identity is, where he came from.”[1]
 1. Jesus is concerned about people understanding who he is in Mark: see 2:10; 2:28; 6:50; 8:29; 10:45; 12:10; 12:35-37; 14:7; 14:22-25; 14:62.
 - b. “In Matthew, Jesus comes into being when he is conceived, or born, of a virgin; in John, Jesus is the incarnate Word of God who was with God in the beginning and through whom the universe was made.”[2]
 - c. “In Matthew, there is not a word about Jesus being God; in John, that’s precisely who he is.”[3]
 - d. “In Matthew, Jesus refuses to perform miracles in order to prove his identity; in John, that is practically the only reason he does miracles.”[4]
 2. See Matthew 12:38-39; compare John 6:30ff, 12:37
 - e. “Matthew’s Gospel is written completely in the third person.”[5] This apparently contradicts the idea that the author is Matthew, an eyewitness.
 - f. Jesus dies in despair in Mark but as one in control in Luke. Compare Mark 15:34 and Luke 23:46
 - g. Jesus had a very short attention span. Compare John 13:36, 14:5 and 16:5.[6]

NPR interview, March 4, 2009

Bart Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), ch 4.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid, pg 9.

3. Consider the following formal contradictions in John that appear deliberate. Why would John write in such a way on purpose?
- a. People believed when they saw Jesus' miracles, versus they did not believe. (John 2:23 vs. 12:37)
 - b. They know where Jesus comes from, versus they do not. (John 7:28 vs. 8:14, 19)
 - c. Jesus did not come into the world to judge it versus he came to judge. (John 12:47, 3:17 vs. 9:39)

A WORD ON INERRANCY

We believe that Scripture, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God. It is our sole authority in all matters of faith and practice.

Though there is some uncertainty in a small percentage of the text as we now have it, this does not render the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy irrelevant or invalid.

The relatively few uncertainties (which are known) do not render uncertain the rest of the text.

WHO WOULD MAKE ALL THIS UP?

There are many details in the Gospels that the authors are not likely to have invented:

1. Jesus' crucifixion.
2. Jesus' teaching was often difficult or offensive. (John 6:60; Luke 11:13)
3. The disciples' repeated failures. (Mark 14:72; 8:33)
4. The teaching that Jesus was God in the flesh.

WHAT ABOUT MIRACLES?

Perhaps the biggest stumbling block for believing the Gospel accounts is the many miracles they contain. However, skepticism towards miracles in the Gospels comes mainly from an anti-supernatural bias. Taken at face value, the accounts of miracles in the Gospels form an orderly pattern that fits naturally within the overall narrative pointing to who Jesus is. Evidence for their historicity is much the same as it is for the rest of the text. Evidence for the grand miracle, the resurrection of Jesus, is exceptional. If that miracle is true, then accepting the rest as true should not be difficult at all.

DID JESUS REALLY RISE FROM THE DEAD?

1. Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in his own tomb. The burial site would be known to everyone. This account comes from the earliest material. Joseph was a member of the Jewish Council. There are no competing accounts.
2. Jesus' tomb was found empty the first Sunday after his crucifixion. Again, this comes from the earliest material. The empty tomb was first discovered by women. The earliest Jewish polemic assumed that the tomb was empty.
3. After his death, Jesus appeared alive to various individuals and groups at different times and places. These claims were made while the persons who saw Jesus were still alive. Jesus appeared to skeptics and unbelievers as well as believers. These appearances were over a limited period.
4. The earliest disciples came to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead under the most unlikely circumstances. Jesus had died a criminal's death. The Jewish belief in resurrection was at the end of the world. All but one of the original eleven disciples were put to death for this belief.

JESUS - THE SIMPLER EXPLANATION

Alternate explanations for any of the data or arguments presented here could, of course, be easily found. Taken all together, however, the evidence given here makes a strong case for the reliability of the Gospel accounts. The simplest explanation for all this evidence is that the Gospels are true, and that Jesus is in fact the Word become flesh, who came to tell us who God is.