

Historical Reliability of the Gospels

By

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In an ABC News special, “The Search for the Historical Jesus,” Peter Jennings investigated the true historical background regarding Jesus Christ. Peter Jennings interviewed numerous scholars and historians and presented a documentary that led us to believe that the Jesus of the Bible is more of a legendary character of faith. He construed that the real historical Jesus was more than likely a man and a good teacher but not the divine Son of God. Unfortunately, Peter Jennings relied on and interviewed scholars from the Jesus Seminar, a group of very liberal scholars who have adopted an anti-supernatural or naturalistic view of the Scriptures. With this presupposition, they overlook the evidence for the historical reliability of the gospels. In this featured special, Peter Jennings states, regarding the gospels, “The New Testament has four different and sometimes contradictory versions of Jesus’ life. There is no reliable evidence about who the authors actually were. It is pretty much agreed they were not eyewitnesses. In fact the gospels were written forty to one hundred years after Jesus’ death.”

Another assault comes from Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code*. In the novel he states,

“The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book” (p. 231).

“The twist is this, ... Because Constantine upgraded Jesus’ status almost four centuries after Jesus’ death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history.... Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike” (p. 234).

Brown alleges that the gospels are not divinely inspired but instead were written centuries after Christ’s death and were embellished by the early church. Jennings and Brown appear quite certain that eyewitnesses did not write the gospels and are convinced that they do not represent an accurate historical work. Jennings and Brown represent the conclusions of today’s critical scholars; however, evidence does support the case for the historical reliability of the gospels.

Confirming the historical integrity of the gospels requires that we present evidence that the writers were eyewitnesses, their writings were factual not fictional, that we have an accurate copy of their works, and that they were men of integrity who could be trusted to record what was true.

The Date of the New Testament Writings

Jesus' ministry extended from 27-30 AD. The gospels are dated traditionally as follows: Mark is believed to be the first gospel written in 60 AD; Matthew and Luke follow and were written some time between 60 and 70 AD. John is the final gospel written in 90-100 AD. Critics claim that the gospels were written much later and this allowed for myths to proliferate and creep into the text. Did eyewitnesses write the gospels or were they written much later? Noted New Testament scholar FF Bruce gives strong evidence that the New Testament was completed by 100 AD and that most of the New Testament works were completed 20-40 years before that date.¹ There is excellent internal and external evidence to support his conclusion.

Internal Evidence for the Gospels

The internal evidence presents a strong case for a first century date for several reasons. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke present Jesus' prophecy regarding the fall of the Jerusalem Temple (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) which occurred in 70 AD. However, the gospels do not record the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy. It is strange that the gospel writers would not record this major event in Jewish history in their writings. The Temple was the focal point of the Jewish religion, the place where God dwelt, and the only place the sacrifices for sin could be performed. Not recording this major event is like a historian writing on the history of New York City and never mentioning the World Trade Center disaster on September 11, 2001. Why is it that the gospel writers do not record the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy? The most plausible reason for this is that it had not occurred during the writing of the gospels.

Also, in the book of Acts, the Temple continues to play a central role in Israel. This indicates that Acts was completed before the fall of the Temple as well. Further confirmation stems from the fact that Luke completes the book of Acts before Paul's death in 64 AD. The book ends with Paul living under house arrest. It is noteworthy that Luke does not record the death of its two chief characters, Peter and Paul. He records the death of less prominent figures like Stephen and James but not the death of his two main characters. We can conclude that the reason for this is Luke finished Acts before their deaths in 64 AD. Another significant point to note is that the Gospel of Luke precedes Acts (Acts 1:1), giving further support for the first century date of Luke. The vast majority of scholars agree that Mark precedes the gospel of Luke. The timing of the other writings would indicate that Mark may have been written even earlier than the traditional date of 60 AD.

Finally, Paul's epistles were written from 48-60 AD. Paul's outline of the life of Jesus matches with the gospels. First Corinthians is one of the least disputed books regarding its dating and Paul's authorship. In chapter 15, Paul summarizes the gospel and reinforces the premise that this is the same gospel preached by the apostles. The creed in verses 3-8 dates back to the very beginning of Christianity. It was a creed Paul probably learned from the Apostles who used it to summarize the gospel message when they taught. Even more compelling is that Paul quotes from Luke's gospel in First Timothy

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 12.

5:18, showing us that Luke's gospel was indeed completed in Paul's lifetime. The internal evidence supports the conclusion that the gospels were written well within the first century, in the lifetime of the eyewitnesses.

External Evidence for the Gospels

The external evidence also presents a good case. New Testament scholars have an enormous amount of ancient manuscript evidence totaling over 5000 documents. An important document is the Chester Beatty Papyri, dated 250 AD, which contains most of the New Testament writings, including most of the book of John. We can safely conclude that the original books of the New Testament were completed much earlier since there needed to be a sufficient time to write, copy, and collect the books of the New Testament.

Another important manuscript is the Bodmer Papyri. This manuscript contains most of the book of John and is dated to have been written in 200 AD. Third, we have the Ryland's Papyri that was found in Egypt and contains a fragment of John dated 120 AD. From this fragment we can conclude that the gospel was completed before 120 AD because not only did the gospel have to be written, it had to be hand-copied and make its way down from Asia Minor to Egypt. Since Matthew, Mark, and Luke precede John, we can support the first century date.

Another line of evidence is found in the writings of the church fathers.² Clement of Rome, whose writings dates to 95 AD, quotes from three of the gospels and other portions of the New Testament. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, writes a letter before his martyrdom in Rome in 115 AD quoting from the four gospels and other New Testament letters. Polycarp wrote to the Philippians in 120 AD and specifically mentions the gospels and New Testament letters. Justin Martyr (150 AD) cites John 3. Several church fathers from the first century are familiar with New Testament works, especially the gospels, and refer to them as inspired Scripture. From these writings we can conclude that the gospels were written and in circulation by the end of the first century AD.

Early dating is important for several reasons. First, since the gospels were written within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, it is very likely they recorded a firsthand account of Christ's life. Second, the closer in date to the event, the more accurate the record. Early dating indicates that eyewitnesses were alive and able to attest to the accuracy of the newly circulating gospels. Apostles often appeal to the witness of the hostile crowd pointing out their knowledge of the facts as well (Acts 2:22, Acts 26:26). Third, the time period between the events and their written record is too short for myths to proliferate. Historian A.N. Sherwin White did a detailed study demonstrating that it takes the passing of two generations for myths to develop. The reason for this is that there needs to be sufficient time for the eyewitnesses to pass from the scene. Finally, with the brief time period from Jesus' ministry to the writing of the first gospel of Mark, there seems even less of a possibility that a "Q" document exists. Q is a hypothetical document from which many scholars believe Matthew and Luke derive the material for their gospels.

In conclusion, both the internal and external evidence show that the gospels are indeed written within the first century and within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses.

² Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL.: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 39.

Archaeology and the Gospels

Next we must answer the question, “Does evidence support the claim that the gospel writers recorded a historically accurate record?” Archaeology confirms the historicity of the Bible, including the gospels. Archaeologist Randall Price states that when it comes to the Bible, there are over 100,000 discoveries related to Biblical references.³

Among the gospel writers, Luke is found to be a very accurate historian. He names 32 countries, 54 cities, and 9 islands without error. Modern mariners have confirmed the accuracy of the details surrounding Paul’s final journey from Palestine to Italy. Luke used titles of government officials, proconsuls, and tetrarchs. While some are unique, they are found to be accurate. For example, in Luke's announcement of Jesus' public ministry (Luke 3:1), he mentions “Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene.” Scholars questioned Luke's credibility since the only Lysanius known for centuries was a ruler of Chalcis who ruled from 40-36 BC. However, an inscription dated to the time of Tiberius, who ruled from 14-37 AD, was found recording a temple dedication which names Lysanius as the “tetrarch of Abila” near Damascus. In Acts 28:7, Luke gives Plubius, the chief man on the island of Malta, the title “first man of the island.” Scholars questioned this unusual title and deemed it unhistorical. Inscriptions have recently been discovered on the island that indeed gives Plubius the title of “first man.” Historian Sir William Ramsey was once a skeptic who traveled to the Middle East to verify the accuracy of Luke’s work. He seriously questioned Luke’s credibility, but after years of research he concluded, “Luke is a historian of first rank...In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”⁴

Luke’s tested accuracy gives us confidence in his works. F.F. Bruce, one of the most respected New Testament scholars writes,

“A man whose accuracy can be demonstrated in matters where we are able to test it is likely to be accurate even where the means for testing him are not available. Accuracy is a habit of mind, and we know from happy experience that some people are habitually accurate just as others can be depended upon to be inaccurate. Luke’s record entitles him to be regarded as a writer of habitual accuracy.”

Numerous archaeological discoveries confirm the events recorded in the gospels as well. In John 5:1-15, Jesus heals a man at the Pool of Bethesda. John describes the pool as having five porticoes. The existence of the pool was disputed until recently, when the Pool of Bethesda was discovered in the northeast quarter of the Old Town Jerusalem. Forty feet underground archaeologists discovered a pool with five porticoes and the description of the surrounding area matches John's layout. John 9:7 mentions another long disputed site, the Pool of Siloam. However, this pool was also discovered in

³ Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out: What Archaeology Reveals About the Truth of the Bible* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House, 1997), 25.

⁴ William Ramsey, *Luke the Physician, 177-179*, quoted in F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 31.

1880, upholding the accuracy of John.⁵

Pontius Pilate is mentioned in all the gospels. Evidence that he was the governor at Jesus' trial and the description of his character as described in the gospels has been affirmed. In 1961, Italian archaeologist Antonio Frova uncovered a fragment of a plaque that was used as a section of steps leading to the Caesarea Theater. The inscription, written in Latin, contained the phrase, "Pontius Pilatus, Prefect of Judea has dedicated to the people of Caesarea a temple in honor of Tiberius." This temple is dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius who reigned from 14-37 AD. The new finding fits chronologically with the New Testament which records that Pilot ruled as procurator from 26-36 AD.⁶

In 1968, a burial site was discovered containing thirty-five bodies. One man identified as Yohanan Ben Ha'galgol was discovered to have been executed in 70 AD. He was crucified by the Romans and the nail that was driven through his ankle was still lodged in his ankle! There was also evidence that nails had been driven through each of his lower arms as well.⁷

These few examples, along with numerous other discoveries, validate the historical accuracy of the Gospels.

Non-Christian Corroboration

Non-Christian sources also confirm the events of the gospels. There are Roman and Jewish historical records that confirm the essence of Christ's life as recorded in the gospels. Tacitus, a Roman historian of the first century, confirms the New Testament designation of Pilate. He writes, "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus. . . ."

Other Roman sources substantiate the gospel accounts as well. In 52 AD, Thallus wrote a historical work of Greece regarding the Trojan War. Although his work is lost, Julius Africanus in 221 AD quotes Thallus. In the third book of Africanus' histories he states that darkness covered the earth during the crucifixion of Jesus. He attributes the darkness to a solar eclipse. From his writings, it can be concluded that the passion story was known in Rome by 50 AD, and that the enemies of Christianity tried to give naturalistic explanations to the occurrence of darkness.

There is also the testimony of Jewish historical works. The *Talmud* (Completed 300 AD) asserts a historical Jesus, but labels him a heretic and attributes his miracles to sorcery and magic. The *Talmud* rarely mentions false teachers so the fact that it mentions Jesus at all indicates that He was a significant figure. The *Talmud* also affirms his death by Roman crucifixion and recognizes the healing ministry of five Apostles.

Another source is Josephus who identifies characters mentioned in the gospels including the Herods as well as Emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero. He also mentions the high priesthood families of Caiaphas, Ananias, and Annas. He also corroborates events in the gospels. In *The Antiquities* 18, he mentions that Gamiliel names Judas the Galilean as leading an uprising (Acts 5:37) and the famine in the days of

⁵ Harold McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1991), 186-192.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 203-204.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

Claudius is mentioned (Acts 11:28). The sudden death of Agrippa (Acts 12), the death of John the Baptist, and the death of James, the Brother of Jesus, are also all mentioned. Archaeology and the historical records from Christian and non-Christian sources prove that the gospels are historical works and not fictional writings.

The Manuscript Evidence

The next objection we must answer is, “Are the New Testament documents accurately preserved?” Here we look at the manuscript evidence. The number of manuscripts that exist and the time gap from the original writings determine manuscript accuracy. Generally speaking, the more ancient the documents and the closer in date to the original writings, the more accurate the text is to the original.

When looking at the number of manuscripts, we find that there are over 5000 Greek manuscripts dating from as early as the first century. Additionally, there are quotes from the church fathers, some as early as the first century, and early translations such as the Latin Vulgate. Putting all the documents together gives us over 24,000 ancient documents. As stated previously, the earliest manuscript is the Rylands Papyri dating about 120 AD. The church fathers also quote sections of the New Testament. Clement of Rome, writing in 95 AD, quotes from three of the gospels and Paul’s letters. Polycarp, writing in 110-150 AD, makes references to all the gospels. The Shepherd of Hermas quoted Matthew and Mark as early as 120-150 AD.

The time gap between the original writings and the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament is twenty-five years. With this small passage of time and the numerous manuscripts available, we can be assured that we have a copy that is accurate to the originals. Furthermore, texts can be compared for accuracy and any changes or incorrect edits can be weighted against the other manuscripts. New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger writes that we have a copy that is 99.5% accurate to the original text.

Comparing it to other works of its time, the number of New Testament manuscripts far exceed all others. The writings of Plato include only seven ancient manuscripts with the earliest dating 1300 years after the date of the original text. There are ten copies of the Gallic Wars with the earliest dating 1,000 years after the original writings. The *Iliad* by Homer contains merely 643 copies. From this we see the New Testament manuscript evidence far exceeds other works of its time. Either we accept the accuracy of the New Testament or we must label what we know of the Greek and Roman Empire as fiction.

Finally, were the authors writers of integrity? First, the time period from the occurrence of events to the time of writing proves too short for legends to develop. Furthermore, they were written during the lifetimes of eyewitnesses who could either corroborate or dispute the facts. Third, the gospels do not appear to be written in the typical style of legends. They include many detailed facts that could easily be substantiated by eyewitnesses. Furthermore, they often appeal to eyewitnesses for confirmation. Luke 3:1-3 includes a detailed account regarding the time of John the Baptist’s ministry. John 19 includes details of Jesus’ burial place. The apostles also leave in stories that show them to be hard of heart, insensitive, cowardly, and slow to learn. These facts would be edited out in a legendary document. The apostles’ writings also retain difficult teachings of Jesus such as his dictates to pray for your enemies and

his warnings of persecution, details that an editor could easily have removed. There are also specifics that illuminate the fact that the gospels were written from four different perspectives. The differing perspectives reveal that the writers did not try to harmonize their works with one another. Finally, the apostles had nothing to gain from their message but a life of suffering and death. None of the authors renounced their faith even in the face of death. All these facts confirm the men who wrote were men of integrity writing from convictions of what they knew to be true.

Conclusion

From the historical evidence, we can reject the critics charge that the gospels are legendary accounts of Jesus' life. There is an abundance of internal and external evidence that support an early date of the gospel writings. There are numerous archaeological and historical records corroborating the events of Jesus' life. Finally, the manuscript evidence assures us that we have a copy accurate to the originals.