

Can You Trust the NT Gospels?

September 5th, 2007

(By Nathan Busenitz)



Several weeks ago, we posted [a brief overview](#) of reasons we, as Christians, believe the Bible to be the Word of God. Along those lines, we are now beginning a series of articles regarding reasons we can trust the veracity of the New Testament Gospels.

Are the New Testament gospels a reliable witness to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ? The question is a basic one, yet it is absolutely foundational to the Christian faith. If the gospel accounts are reliable, then we have overwhelming reason to embrace Jesus Christ as the Messiah. His ancestry, birth, baptism, ministry, miracles, teaching, death, and resurrection all lead to the same inescapable conclusion.

But if the gospels are not reliable, then we have a massive theological dilemma. If the Jesus of the Bible was not the real Jesus, then our faith in Him is almost surely misplaced.

For centuries, the universal assumption was that the gospels were reliable historical accounts. But since the rise of theological liberalism, many scholars (like those of the [Jesus Seminar](#)) have seriously questioned whether or not the New Testament record is historically accurate. The result has been a search for the “historical Jesus,” which is free from the “Christ of faith” presented in the biblical accounts. In the words of one liberal critic, “The narrative Gospels

have no claim as historical accounts. The Gospels are imaginative creations.”[1]

So, is the testimony of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John trustworthy (assuming those men actually wrote the books that bear their names)? Or is it interpretative history, which like interpretative dance, is more the product of imagination than reality?

Over the next few days, we will briefly consider ten factors that support the reliability of the New Testament gospel accounts. Much more could, of course, be said about each of these reasons. In fact, whole books have been written on this subject, and rightly so.[2] After all, it is critical that we begin with a trustworthy record of what Jesus said and did. Otherwise, we will never be able to examine His life and ministry with any level of confidence.

First, we can trust the NT gospels because they are consistent with previous revelation given in the Old Testament.

If the New Testament gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26-27; 16:12-15), they must harmonize with that which the Holy Spirit previously revealed in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-11). We cannot embrace them if they are inconsistent with that which has come before, since God cannot contradict His Word (Luke 16:17; John 10:35; cf. Num. 23:19; 2 Timothy 2:13; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

If God authored both the Old and New Testaments (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; 3:15-16), then we should expect their doctrine and message to be consistent. And indeed, this is the case. The New Testament is the perfect complement to the Old, and in fact, the unity of Scripture is underscored by Jesus and the apostles, who saw the New Testament as the perfect complement to the Old (cf. Luke 18:31-33, 24:27, 36-48; John 5:39, 46; Acts 10:43; 1 Peter 1:10-12).

In the gospel accounts, this consistency becomes most clear when we consider what the Old Testament predicted about the Messiah. On this point, a host of Old Testament passages might be cited (such as Gen. 3:14-15; Deut.

18:15-19; Ps. 2:12; 22:1,16,18; 110:1-4; Is. 9:1-7; 42:1-4; 49:6; 53:1-12; 59:16-20; 61:1-3; Jer. 23:5-6; Dan. 7:13-14; 9:20-27; Zech. 3:8-9; 6:12-13; 9:9-10; Mal. 3:1-3; 4:5-6). According to some scholars, there are nearly 300 prophecies in the Old Testament related to the Christ's first coming.[3] In each case, the picture of the Messiah painted in the Old Testament matches perfectly with the description of Jesus in the four gospels. But this is certainly not true of the "historical Jesus" depicted by liberal scholars.

The New Testament writers understood the importance of the Old Testament record, and they repeatedly emphasized the fact that "Moses and all the prophets" (Luke 24:27) pointed to Jesus (cf. Matthew 2:15, 17, 23, 13:14, 35, 26:54, 56, 27:9; Mark 14:49; Luke 1:1, 18:31, 22:37, 24:44; John 17:12, 18:9, 19:24, 28, 36; and many others).

According to the Old Testament, the coming Messiah would:

Be a descendant of Abraham (compare Gen. 22:18 with Gal. 3:16)
Be a descendant of Jacob (compare Num. 24:17 with Lk. 3:23, 34)
Be from the tribe of Judah (compare Gen. 49:10 with Lk. 3:23, 33)
Be from the family of Jesse (compare Is. 11:1 with Lk. 3:23, 32)
Be from the house of David (compare Jer. 23:5 with Lk. 3:23, 31)
Be born at Bethlehem (compare Micah 5:2 with Matt. 2:1)
Be the pre-existent one (compare Micah 5:2 with Col. 1:17)
Be the Lord (compare Psalm 110:1 with Matt. 22:43-45)
Be God with us (compare Isaiah 7:14 with Matt. 1:23)
Be a prophet (compare Deut. 18:18 with Matt. 21:11)
Be a priest (compare Psalm 110:4 with Heb. 3:1; 5-6)
Be a king (compare Psalm 2:6 with Matt. 27:37)
Be anointed by the Spirit (compare Is. 11:2 with Matt. 3:16, 17)
Be zealous for God (compare Ps. 69:9 with John 2:15, 16)
Have a forerunner (compare Is. 40:3; Mal. 3:1 with Matt. 3:1,2)
Begin His ministry in Galilee (compare Is. 9:1 with Matt. 4:12-17)
Have a ministry of miracles (compare Is. 35:5,6 with Matt. 9:35)
Bring healing and spiritual life (compare Is. 61:1-2 with Lk. 4:18).
Enter Jerusalem on a donkey (compare Zech. 9:9 with Lk. 19:35-37)
Be rejected by the Jews (compare Psalm 118:22 with 1 Pet. 2:7)
Be silent before His accusers (compare Is. 53:7 with Matt. 27:12)
Be wounded and bruised (compare Is. 53:5 with Matt. 27:26)
Be smitten and spit upon (compare Is. 50:6 with Matt. 26:67)
Be crucified with thieves (compare Is. 53:12 with Matt. 27:38)
Have His garments divided (compare Ps. 22:18 with John 19:23,24)
Have his side pierced (compare Zech. 12:10 with John 19:34)
Be buried in a rich man's tomb (compare Is. 53:9 with Matt. 27:57ff)
Come before Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed (compare Dan. 9:26 with Matt. 24:2) [4]

If we take messianic prophecy at all seriously, believing that it was historically fulfilled, then we are drawn immediately to the Christ of the New Testament gospels. No other record of Jesus' life—whether from the Gnostics or the skeptics—is consistent with Old Testament revelation. On the other hand, because the New Testament gospels are in perfect harmony with earlier revelation from God, they can be trusted.

The Old Testament, then, is our first witness to the authenticity of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Notes:

[1] Burton Mack, *Time Magazine*, January 10, 1994, [online source](#).

[2] F. F. Bruce's *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* and Craig Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament Gospels* are two such works, and are highly recommended for further study on this topic.

[3] See, for example, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, 164.

[4] Robert T. Boyd outlines 48 such prophecies in his *Boyd's Handbook of Practical Apologetics*, 125-127.

The Gospels and the Men Who Wrote Them

September 6th, 2007

(By Nathan Busenitz)

Today we will consider a second reasons why the NT gospels are reliable accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Not only are they consistent with previous revelation from God (in the Old Testament), but they were also written by those who were closely associated with Jesus and His ministry—men who were either eye-witnesses or had access to first-hand information about Jesus and His life.

A second reason to trust the NT gospels is that they were written by those closely associated with Jesus and His ministry.

Two of the gospels, Matthew and John, were penned by disciples of Jesus and provide eye-witness testimony to the events they discuss (cf. John 1:14; 21:20–25; 1 John 1:1-4). The Gospel of Mark was written by a close friend and associate of the apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:13; cf. Acts 12:12). In fact, the early Christian leader Papias (c. 60-c. 130) reported that “Mark became an interpreter of Peter; as many things as he remembered he wrote down accurately (though certainly not in order) the things said or done by the Lord” (*Fragments of Papias* 2:15). So Mark’s gospel reflects the memoirs of Peter, which Mark preserved by writing down.

Luke (who wrote both the third gospel and the book of Acts) was the traveling companion of the apostle Paul (cf. Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16; Col. 4:14), and was a careful researcher. Luke himself reports that he wrote his gospel, “having investigated everything carefully from the beginning . . . so that you may know the exact truth” (Luke 1:3-4). The biblical gospels, then, are the product of eye-witness testimony (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:21-22; Gal. 1; Heb. 2:3; 2 Peter 1:16), either first-hand (in the case of Matthew and John) or second-hand (in the case of Mark and Luke). As those who venerated Jesus, they took special care in giving solemn testimony to His life (Acts 2:40; 8:25; 10:42; 18:5; 20:21; 28:23; 1 John 1:2; 4:14; 2 Pet. 1:16-20; Rev. 1:2).

That Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the actual authors of the gospels that bear their names is overwhelmingly supported by the testimony of church history, with affirmation coming from early Christian leaders such as Papias (c. 60-c. 130), Justin Martyr (100-165), Polycrates (c. 130-196), Irenaeus (c. 140-c. 202) who cites Polycarp (c. 69-160), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215), Tertullian (c.160-c. 220), Origen (c.185-c. 254), Eusebius (c. 263-c. 339), Jerome (c. 345-420) and others. Never is the fourfold gospel seriously questioned. In the words of Irenaeus (c. 140-c. 202):

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the “pillar and ground” of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh. . . . And therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things, among which Christ Jesus is seated. (*Against Heresies*, 3.11.8)



Irenaeus continues by listing the four gospels as we know them today: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Of course, nearly a century earlier, Papias had already given testimony to these same four books.[1] According to the church historian Eusebius, Irenaeus also received some of his information from Polycarp, who was taught these things by the apostles (Eusebius, *Church History*, 4.14.3–8; cf. 2 Tim. 2:2).

Internal evidence, coming from the books themselves, is consistent with the testimony of church history. For example, Matthew's gospel frequently references the Old Testament, and describes Jesus' interaction with the Jews in a way that suggests its author was a native Jew.[2] It also puts greater emphasis on numbers and on money than the other gospels, a characteristic that would be consistent with the author's occupation as a tax collector (Matthew 9:9).[3] In Mark's gospel, the apostle Peter is cast in a more negative light than in the other gospels (cf. Mark 8:32–33; 14:29–72), suggesting that he was the self-effacing source from which Mark received his information. The author of Luke also wrote Acts (compare Luke 1 with Acts 1) and was a traveling companion of Paul (cf. Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16). He is explicit in emphasizing that he researched his information thoroughly (Luke 1:1–4), as is seen in the many historically verifiable details he includes (some of which will be considered in a later post). This is fitting for one who was trained as a physician (Col. 4:14).

The author of John speaks of himself only as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:7). This corresponds to John's emphasis on love in his three epistles (1 John 3:16, 23; 4:9–10, 19; 2 John 1:6). Moreover, the author was a disciple (cf. John 21:2, 20, 24), one of the Twelve (John 13:23–24; cf. Mark 14:17; Luke 22:14), an eye-witness to the events of Christ's life and death (John 1:14; 19:26, 35), and among the inner circle of Christ's followers, but not Peter (cf. John 20:2–10; Mark 5:37–38; 9:2–3; 14:33). Only John and his brother James fit these criteria. But since James was martyred early in church history (Acts 12:2), the evidence points to John as the author (cf. John 21:22–23). The fact that much of John's material is unique (intended as a supplement to the other gospels) suggests that someone with authority must have written it, otherwise the early church would have never accepted it as factual.

In all four cases, the internal evidence (meaning details within the book itself such as writing style, biographical data, and historical details) and the external evidence (meaning non-biblical testimony that affirms the authorship of a given book) consistently and repeatedly affirm the authorship of the gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. On the flip side, there is nothing that should cause us to question their authenticity.

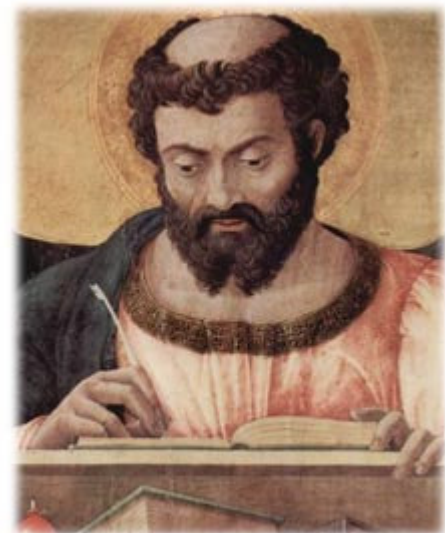
Was It Meant to Be History?

September 7th, 2007

In this article, we will consider a third reason why the NT gospels should be considered trustworthy sources regarding the life of Christ.

3. The NT gospels are written in such a way that indicates they were intended as historical.

Luke makes the purpose of his gospel clear at the very beginning. He wrote it so that his readers might know “the exact truth about the things” related to the life of Jesus (1:4). John makes a similar assertion at the end of his work, emphasizing that he was the one who testified “to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24). In this regard, Luke and John are representative of all four gospel writers; each was committed to presenting Jesus in a way that was accurate and true. “History is important to the gospel writers. Their report of history in Jesus' life required accuracy. Their accuracy provides us with a sure foundation for our trust in the redeeming message of the gospel.” [1]



Unlike other apocryphal accounts of Christ's life, which are “clearly legendary” and often “so unreal and pointless that they can immediately be seen to be of a quite different character from the New Testament accounts of Jesus,”[2] the New Testament gospels were written to be reliable accounts of

what actually happened. Their motivation for doing so would have been both theological and evangelistic. From a theological perspective, they would never have wanted to bear false witness against Jesus, the one whom they worshipped and served.

From an apologetics standpoint, they would have deeply desired their message to be believable. Since the events of Jesus' life were well-known to the people of that day, especially in Israel (cf. Acts 2:22; 26:26; cf. 1 Cor. 15:6), the gospel writers needed to represent the facts correctly. As Donald Guthrie points out, "An intention to lead people to faith in Jesus as Messiah and as Son of God is hardly likely to be furthered by an account of Jesus which was not closely related to the historical facts."^[3]

It follows, then, that the gospel writers' approach to the historical data was intended as accurate. The number of historical details they include (such as social customs, geographical locations, and the names of political figures) further suggests a desire to deal with factual data in a responsible and straightforward manner. For example, consider the twenty one allusions to historical events, geographical places, and political positions in Luke 3:1–2:

In the fifteenth year (1) of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (2), Pontius Pilate (3) being governor (4) of Judea (5), and Herod (6) being tetrarch (7) of Galilee (8), and his brother Philip (9) tetrarch (10) of the region of Ituraea (11) and Trachonitis (12), and Lysanias (13) tetrarch (14) of Abilene (15), during the high priesthood (16) of Annas (17) and Caiaphas (18), the word of God came to John (19) the son of Zechariah (20) in the wilderness (21).

In just two verses, it becomes clear that Luke's goal was to convey that which was tied to historical fact. This is in keeping with his stated purpose for writing (Luke 1:4).

The style of the gospels further supports this conclusion. They are written in straightforward and sensible manner, giving the reader no reason to doubt the sincere motives of each author. Along these lines, the gospels include details that are embarrassing to the writers (and the other apostles), indicating that they were more interested in seeking the truth than in making themselves look good (cf. Matt. 17:16; 26:30–35; Mark 8:33; 9:32, 34; 14:40, 51, 66–72; Luke 18:34; John 12:16).

Consider the way the gospels are written—in a sober and responsible fashion, with accurate incidental details, with obvious care and exactitude. You don't find the outlandish flourishes and blatant mythologizing that you see in a lot of other ancient writings. . . . The goal of the gospel writers was to attempt to record what had actually happened.^[4]

On a side note, we might add that the apostle Paul also understood that unless his faith was based on real history, it was an empty faith (1 Cor. 15:12–19). His love for Christ (1 Cor. 16:22; 2 Cor. 5:14; Eph. 6:24), loyalty to Christ (1 Cor. 4:1; 2 Cor. 4:5; Gal. 6:14), and accountability to Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. Rom. 14:10; 1 Tim. 6:13–16), motivated him (like the other apostles) to preach a gospel that was true (cf. Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5–6; 1 Tim. 2:3–7). (As we will see below, Paul's depiction of Jesus was in perfect harmony with that of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.)

Finally, it should be noted that the gospel writers, as well as all of the apostles, faced intense persecution for the gospel message they proclaimed (John 15:18–25; Acts 5:40–41; 2 Cor. 11:23–28; 1 Pet. 4:12–16). According to church tradition, both Matthew and Mark were martyred for their faith. Though Luke and John were probably not martyred, many of the other apostles were (including Peter, Paul, James, Andrew, Bartholomew, Thaddeus, Philip, Simon, and Thomas). It is hard to believe that the writers of these gospels and their fellow Christians would have endured such hardship for that which they knew was only a myth.

The point here is that the authors of the biblical gospels intended their material to be accurate and historically trustworthy. To be sure, they had theological and apologetic concerns too. But, as we have seen, those concerns would not have mitigated against historical accuracy. On the contrary, they would have made truthfulness all the more necessary.

In our next post (on Monday) we will consider whether or not the gospels actually demonstrate themselves to be historically accurate. In other words, did the writers achieve the historical accuracy for which they were aiming?

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The Gospels as Reliable History

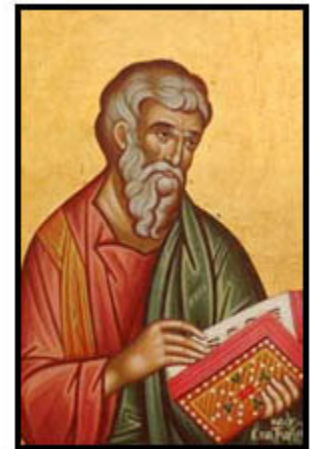
September 10th, 2007

(By Nathan Busenitz)

Last week, we began looking at ten reasons we can trust the New Testament gospels. Today's post highlights the fourth reason in that list.

4. Fourth, the New Testament gospels were not only intended to be historically reliable (as we saw in point 3). They actually *are* historically reliable.

It is not enough to demonstrate that the gospel writers intended to be accurate. Good intentions are simply not enough. After all, "some fictitious narratives are couched in the guise of history, and many careful historians fail to achieve their objectives of complete accuracy."^[1] We must therefore go one step further and ask whether or not the gospel writers were successful in their attempt to be accurate. In other words, do the gospel accounts actually prove to be historically reliable?



If the gospels are to be considered part of the inspired Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17), coming from the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20-21), they must be marked by accuracy and truthfulness (John 17:17; cf. 2 Pet. 1:16-18; 1 John 1:1-4). Moreover, in the particular case of the apostles, Jesus promised that the Spirit would help them remember the details of His life. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26; cf. 14:17). This means that Matthew, Mark (in consulting Peter), Luke (in also consulting apostolic sources — cf. Luke 1:3-4), and John all had the Spirit's help in remembering the teachings of Jesus (cf. John 2:22; 12:16). According to the promise of Jesus, the Spirit would guide them in the truth (John 16:13), truth that necessarily included the historical reliability of their collective testimony.

Luke's gospel is a case in point in this regard, since he repeatedly lists names, places, and other verifiable details which can be tested for accuracy (Luke 1:5; 2:1-3; 3:1-3; Acts 5:36; 11:28; 18:2, 12: 25:1). As we noted earlier, "throughout his work Luke sought to demonstrate the truthfulness of what he recorded by tying the events to universal history."^[2] Significantly, two millennia later, Luke's account has repeatedly survived the attacks of skeptics and detractors. "Attempts to impugn Luke's reliability have constantly been made, but most of these have been rendered futile by light from the monuments of antiquity and the archaeologist's spade."^[3]

On the other hand, archeology has repeatedly vindicated Luke's careful research (in both his gospel or in Acts). Such confirmations include: the census at the time of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:1-3); Herod's Temple and winter palace (Luke 1:9); the proconsul of Paphos named Serigus Paulus (Acts 13:6-7); the relationship between Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 14:6); the district of Macedonia (Acts 16:12); Artemis' temple, statues, and altar (Acts 19:27-28, 35); the Ephesian theater and Golden House of Nero (Acts 19:29; 25:10); the two ways to gain Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28); the nature of the provincial penal procedure (Acts 24:1-9); the manner in which one could invoke one's Roman citizenship (Acts 25:18); the nature of being in Roman custody (Acts 28:16); and the conditions of being imprisoned at one's own expense (Acts 28:30-31).^[4] In Acts alone, "Luke names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities and nine islands without an error."^[5]

Time and time again, we find that "Luke is a first-class ancient historian. . . . He is not careless, nor is he a fabricator of events."^[6] In the words of famed archaeologist Sir William Ramsay, "His statements of fact [are] trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense."^[7]

Of course, the motivation behind Luke's concern for accuracy was not primarily historical. As noted before, it was both theological and evangelistic. In the words of New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall, "Luke was a historian because he was first and foremost an Evangelist: he knew that the faith which he wished to proclaim stands or falls with the history of Jesus and the early church."^[8] Others agree:

Luke was not only a reliable, objective historian, which is clear from his striking agreements with the historiography of Josephus, but Luke was also concerned with the infallibility of the facts. Luke wanted to describe the development of early Christianity. But he wanted above all to eliminate doubt as to the accuracy of the things that had been fulfilled, that is, the saving work of Christ, and desired to give assurance to Theophilus and his other readers regarding events in Christ's life.[9]

It's not surprising, then, that Luke's accounts "have now been recognized as first-class historical writings"[10] by historians and archaeologists. "This means that Luke is fully trustworthy as a historian of the life of Christ. Therefore to read the third gospel is to encounter the authentic, historical Jesus."[11]

Along with Luke, the other gospels also prove to be based on historically verifiable facts. As New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg explains, "In every case it has been concluded that an even-handed treatment of the data does not lead to a distrust of the accuracy of the gospels in what they choose to report."[12] While some modern historians may sometimes wish the gospel writers had given more historical data, or more precise details about the events they recount, the bottom line is this: Their testimony to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ can be trusted.

Like Luke and the other synoptic gospels (of Matthew and Mark), John's gospel also provides its readers with numerous references to testable data like geography and chronology.

These have been demonstrated to be highly accurate, particularly in light of modern archaeological discoveries: the five porticoes of the pool of Bethesda by the Sheep Gate ([John] 5:2), the pool of Siloam (9:1-7), Jacob's well at Sychar (4:5), the "Pavement" (Gabbatha) where Pilate pronounced judgment on Jesus (19:13), Solomon's porch (10:22-23), and so on.[13]

This is in keeping with John's emphasis on truth throughout his gospel (John 1:14, 17; 3:21; 4:23-24; 5:33; 8:32, 40, 44-46; 14:6, 17; 15:26; 16:13; 17:17, 19; 18:37, 38; 19:35). He too would have been deeply concerned with presenting Jesus ("the way, the truth, and the life"—John 14:6), in a reliable way. In the words of one scholar:

The author claims to have been a true witness, that is an eyewitness of Jesus. In his first letter he said that he and his fellows had "heard," "seen" and "touched" the "word of life" (1 John 1:1-2). His claims are extensive and specific. The alternatives are simple. Either the writer was the truthful eyewitness he claims to have been, or, as [some liberal scholars] believe, he was not.[14]

John's concern for geographical places (cf. John 1:28; 4:5; 10:23; 11:18; 19:17, 20; 21:1), chronological details (cf. 1:29, 35, 43; 2:1, 12; 4:43, 52; 5:1; 7:1; etc.), cultural beliefs and customs (cf. 4:9, 27; 5:10; 7:22-23, 49), and eye-witness testimony (cf. 1:14; 21:24), demonstrates that he (like Luke) was also concerned with tying his witness to testable history.[15] When the details of his account are tested, they "take us, alongside that of the others [Matthew, Mark, and Luke], to the Jesus of history who remains an integral part of the Christ of faith." [16]

The gospels, then, continually show themselves to be not only theological treatises, but historically reliable documents as well. Their historical trustworthiness (along with the rest of the New Testament) is "confirmed time and again by external evidence. . . . [T]o the unbiased observer, little doubt can be cast on the statement that archaeology has confirmed the historical reliability of the New Testament." [17]

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NOTES:

[1] Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 234.

[2] R. H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC), introduction.

[3] Merrill F. Unger, "The Role of Archaeology in the Study of the New Testament," *BSac* 116 (April 1959), 155.

- [4] John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Ready with an Answer*, 288. Also: <http://apologetics.johndepoe.com/bible.html>
- [5] Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 47.
- [6] Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, BECNT, 13.
- [7] Ramsay, *Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 222.
- [8] I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 52.
- [9] Nicholas M. van Ommeren, “Was Luke an Accurate Historian?” *BSac* 138:589 (January 1991), 70–71.
- [10] Clifford Wilson, *Rocks, Relics, and Biblical Reliability*, 114.
- [11] Marvin Pate, *Moody Gospel Luke Commentary*, 27.
- [12] Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 234–35.
- [13] William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 219.
- [14] Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?*, 72.
- [15] Cf. Thomas D. Lea, “The Reliability of History in John’s Gospel” *JETS* 38:3 (September 1995), 387–402.
- [16] John A.T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament*, 94.
- [17] J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 135.

The Gospels and the Early Church

September 12th, 2007

(By Nathan Busenitz)



This is the next installment of our series regarding the trustworthiness of the New Testament. In past posts we have already considered four reasons why the NT gospels can be considered reliable witnesses to Jesus’ life.

Fifth, the early Christian community would have demanded an accurate record.

Throughout the book of Acts, the apostles emphasized the fact that they were eyewitnesses to the events of Christ’s life (cf. Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39). The apostle Paul similarly recorded that at least five hundred people had seen Jesus after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6). This included Christian leaders such as Peter, the twelve disciples, and James the brother of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:5, 7). In addition to this, about three thousand others joined the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), most of whom were familiar with the news

about Jesus' life and death and miracles (Luke 24:18; Acts 2:22; 26:26).

From the inception of the church, then, the truth about Jesus was validated by eyewitness testimony — testimony that included hundreds, if not thousands, of people. As Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote their respective gospels, they would have known that many in the church were already familiar with the basic facts of Jesus' life. Those with firsthand information about Jesus would have known immediately if something in the gospel records was incorrect.

That the gospel writers were subject to such accountability is confirmed by the early dates of each of their accounts. All four gospels were written in the first century, as even many liberal scholars are willing to admit.[1] This, of course, is necessarily true if Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the actual authors of the gospels (a point which has already been established). It is further supported by both the archeological and historical evidence. For example, Matthew is referenced in the writings of the church father Ignatius (who died around 110 A.D.), and fragments of the gospel have been found which date to the latter part of the first century.[2] The gospel of John is likewise attested by fragments from as early as 100 A.D. which quote from or allude to the gospel (P52 and Papyrus Egerton 2).

Most scholars date Mark around 65-70 AD with Luke, Matthew, and John writing later.[3] Others argue for earlier dates (in the 40s, 50s, and 60s), and with good reason.[4] But even if late-first century dates are accepted, “the Gospels were still written during the time when eyewitnesses who had seen Jesus and had experienced his ministry were alive. One would, therefore, still be on good historical grounds for treating them as solid historical sources.”[5] Even at the end of the first century, not enough time had elapsed for the historical facts of Jesus' life to have been eclipsed by legend.

In this regard, A. N. Sherwin-White, a scholar of ancient Roman and Greek history at Oxford, has studied the rate at which legend accumulated in the ancient world, using the writings of Herodotus as a test case. He argues that even a span of two generations is not sufficient for legend to wipe out a solid core of historical facts. The picture of Jesus in the New Testament was established well within that length of time.[6]

A full discussion of the proposed dates for each of the gospels is outside the scope of our purposes here. But whatever first-century dates are assigned, one point remains: Based on the archaeological and historical evidence, “the New Testament proves to be in fact what it was formerly believed to be: the teaching of Christ and his immediate followers between cir. 25 and cir. 80 A.D.”[7]

This point is made even stronger when one considers the ethical standards upheld in the early church, where truthfulness and integrity were expected of those who followed Jesus (Acts 5:4; 26:25; 2 Cor. 4:2; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 John 2:21; 5:20). False teachers were not tolerated (cf. Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Tim. 3:8; Titus 1:14; 2 Pet. 2:1–21; Jude 1-16), and those who distorted the life and ministry of Jesus were openly condemned (cf. 1 John 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7). Even the apostles were not above being confronted when necessary (Gal. 2:11-15; cf. 1 Tim. 5:19-20). Thus, because any type of false witness about Jesus would have dishonored the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 15:15), it is unreasonable to think the earliest Christians would have quietly allowed it.

* * * * *

Notes:

[1] Josh McDowell, in *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, 52-53, cites Kümmel and John A.T. Robinson as examples of non-evangelical scholars who believe all four gospels were written before 100 A.D.

[2] *Boyd's Handbook of Practical Apologetics*, 233, notes that in early 1995 “three small papyrus fragments of Matthew stored in a library in England for decades, were reexamined. It was determined that they date to the latter part of the first century A.D.”

[3] Liberal scholars generally consider Matthew and John to have been the last two gospels written, meaning that Mark and Luke were written earlier. On the other hand, some conservative scholars consider Matthew to be the first gospel written. *The Jesus Crisis*, by Robert Thomas and F. David Farnell, defends that conservative view.

[4] Late dates do not adequately take into account factors such as the ending of Acts (which suggest a date for Luke-Acts in the 50s or 60s) or the seemingly absent awareness of the fall of Jerusalem, especially in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (suggesting they were all written before A.D. 70).

[5] J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 151. Church tradition suggests that the apostle John, for example, lived until around 100 A.D.

[6] Ibid., 156. Moreland references Sherwin-White's volume, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, 186-93.

[7] William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 52-53.

Gospel Harmony

September 14th, 2007

(By Nathan Busenitz)

This is the sixth installment in our series on the trustworthiness of the New Testament gospels. In case you've missed any of the discussion so far, here are links to [part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#), [part 4](#), and [part 5](#).

Sixth, the picture of Christ and His ministry is consistent/harmonious within the four gospels.

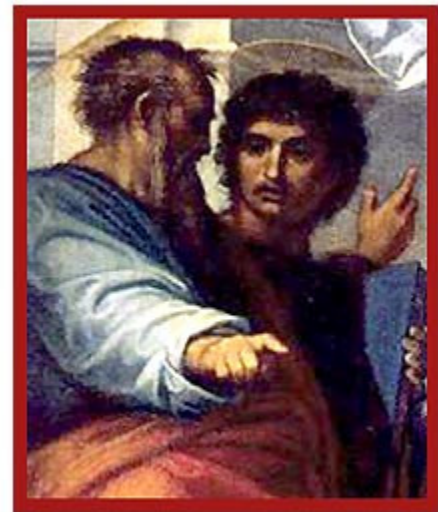
Though penned by four different individuals (and thus from four different perspectives), the biblical gospels present a picture of Jesus Christ that is consistent. This is critical, because if the gospels did not agree with one another, they could not all be regarded as historically reliable sources of information.

In the gospels we learn about Jesus' human lineage, both His legal ancestry through Joseph (Matt. 1:1–17) and His physical genealogy through Mary (Luke 3:23–38). We also learn about His heavenly preexistence (John 1:1–5; 14–18). As records of Jesus' life, the gospels tell us about His birth, baptism, temptation, teaching, miracles, confrontations with the Jewish religious leaders; and ultimately His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension.

Matthew presents Jesus as the King (Matt. 2:2), Mark as the Servant (Mark 10:45), Luke as the Savior (Luke 19:10), and John as the Son of God (John 20:31). Yet, in spite of their different emphases, the presentation of Christ in each is consistent with the rest. In all four, Jesus is the Messiah, the miracle-worker who preached with divine authority and called the world to turn from sin and follow Him (e.g. Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; John 12:26). In all four, He came to bring salvation to sinners by laying down his life on the cross and conquering death through His resurrection (e.g. Matt. 1:21; Mark 16:16; Luke 19:10; John 3:17). Though written from different perspectives, not unlike four different news reporters writing about the same news story, the biblical gospels combine to form a powerful and coherent account of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Though critics point to apparent contradictions within the gospel accounts, their allegations ultimately fall short. Satisfactory explanations for such “difficulties” are readily available.[1] In fact, “the large number of common-sense explanations available for almost every so-called contradiction that has ever been pointed out must surely be considered before glibly dismissing the NT as hopelessly contradictory.”[2] Often the supposed contradictions are nothing more than the same event being paraphrased or described from a different point of view. Thus, as Craig Blomberg notes:

Once you allow for the elements . . . of paraphrase, of abridgement, of explanatory additions, of selection, of omission—the gospels are extremely consistent with each other by ancient standards, which are the only standards



by which it's fair to judge them. [For that matter,] if the gospels were too consistent, that in itself would invalidate them as independent witnesses. People would then say we really only have one testimony that everybody else is just parroting.[3]

Critics tend to point first to alleged contradictions between the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the gospel of John—as though the presentation of Jesus given by John is incompatible with that of the other gospel writers. But such accusations ultimately stem from the imaginations of liberal scholars, and not from a straightforward reading of the text itself. In the words of New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce,

Whatever difficulties some scholars have felt, most readers of the Gospels in all ages have been unaware of any fundamental discrepancy between the Christ who speaks and acts in the fourth Gospel and Him who speaks and acts in the Synoptics. Many have testified that John leads them into an even deeper and more intimate appreciation of the mind of Christ than do the other three.[4]

In the end, liberal accusations about John's gospel just do not hold up. Though most of John's material is unique to his gospel, there is "nothing in John contradicts the synoptics, and vice versa." [5] Once we understand that John's gospel was written after the other gospels, as a supplement to them, we find that there are no irreconcilable contradictions between the accounts.

The Gospels Meet the Epistles

September 20th, 2007

(By Nathan Busenitz)

This is the next part of our series looking at ten reasons we believe the New Testament gospels are historically reliable. To access the previous posts in this series, [click here](#).

Seventh, the picture of Jesus in the gospels is consistent with the picture of Jesus found in the rest of the New Testament.

Not only are the gospels consistent with each other, they are also consistent with the rest of the New Testament. This is first seen in the book of Acts, where the testimonies of Peter (in Acts 2:22-24; 3:13-20; 4:27-31; 5:29-31; 10:38-43), Philip (in Acts 8:25-40), and Paul (in Acts 17:30-31; 26:22-23) correspond perfectly with the accounts of the gospel writers. But it doesn't stop there.

The rest of the New Testament also affirms that Jesus was a real Jewish man (cf. 1 John 1:1-4; 4:2), a descendent of Abraham (Rom. 9:5) and David (Rom. 1:3), who was born of a woman (Gal. 4:4) and had siblings (1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19; James 1:1; Jude 1). He was poor (2 Cor. 8:9; cf. Rom. 15:3; Php. 2:6-8), meek and gentle (2 Cor. 10:1; 1 Pet. 2:23), selfless (Rom. 15:3; Php 2:5), and righteous (1 Cor. 1:30; 1 Pet. 1:19).

He was transfigured on a mountain with several of His disciples (2 Pet. 1:16-18). Yet, at the end of His ministry, He was betrayed (1 Cor. 11:23), and on the night He was betrayed instituted a memorial supper (1 Cor. 11:23-25). He then stood trial before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim. 6:13), suffered (1 Pet. 1:11; 2:21-23), and was crucified (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:8; Gal. 3:1, 1 Pet. 2:24, 3:18) through the instigation of the Jewish leaders (1 Thess. 2:14-15). On the third day He was buried and raised and appeared to many (1 Cor. 15:4-8; cf. 1 Pet. 1:3, 21). He then ascended (Eph. 1:20; cf. Rom. 10:6; Eph. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:21; 3:22) and will one day return to this earth for those who are His own (e.g. 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Tim. 6:14; Titus 2:11-14).

Thus, through their letters, Peter, Paul, and John affirm the main tenets of Jesus' earthly ministry. Many scholars consider the testimony in Paul's letters to be especially significant because they are usually dated earlier than the gospels (and are therefore considered the earliest biblical testimony to the facts of Jesus life).



In addition to the details of His life, the teachings of Jesus are also echoed in the rest of the New Testament. The apostle Paul emphasizes that Christ died to bring salvation to sinners (Rom. 5:6-8; Luke 19:10; John 15:13); that love fulfills the law (Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:14; cf. Mark 12:31); that taxes must be paid to whom they are due (Rom. 13:7; cf. Mark 12:16-17); and that Christians should not seek their own revenge (Rom. 12:17; Matt. 5:39), but rather should bless those who persecute them (Rom. 12:14; cf. Luke 6:27-28). Paul even quotes Jesus in 1 Timothy 5:18 (cf. Matt. 10:10; Luke 10:7) in asserting that the laborer is worthy of his wages. Paul's reference to faith moving mountains (1 Cor. 13:2) also seems to correspond to the words of Jesus in Mark 11:23.

Other New Testament writers, such as James and John show a similar familiarity with the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ (e.g. James 1:2 cf. Mt. 5:10-12; 1:22 cf. Mt. 7:24ff; 3:12 cf. Mt. 7:16; 2:5 cf. Mt. 5:3; 4:11-12 cf. Mt. 7:1; 5:2 cf. Mt. 6:19; 5:12 cf. Mt. 5:34-37; 1 John 1:1-3 cf. John 1:1, 14; 1:6 cf. John 8:12, 55; 2:3 cf. John 14:15, 23; 2:6 cf. John 15:4; 2:7 cf. John 13:34; 2:18 cf. Mark 13:22; 2:27 cf. John 14:16-17, 26; 3:1 cf. John 1:10; 3:2 cf. John 1:12).

All of this, of course, corresponds perfectly with the account of Jesus presented in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Jesus of the epistles does not contradict the Jesus of the Gospels. Quite the contrary, the letters of the New Testament affirm the reliability of the Gospel accounts.

Jesus' Life Outside the Bible

September 26th, 2007

(By Nathan Busenitz)

Today's article is a continuation of our series on why we can trust the reliability of the New Testament gospels. Today we will consider an eighth reason the biblical account of Jesus' life can be trusted.

Eighth, the main points of Jesus' life as presented in the NT gospels accord with other non-biblical sources.

It should come as no surprise that the major events of Jesus' life would be noted by more than just the writers of the New Testament. As Paul told Festus, speaking of King Agrippa, "The king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). The early Christians were to be witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8); hence the message about Jesus quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire.



We would expect, of course, the testimony of the early church fathers and the Christian catacombs to reflect what is taught by the New Testament gospels. And that is indeed the case. Ignatius (c. 35–107), as just one example among many, wrote of "the birth, and passion, and resurrection which took place in the time of the government of Pontius Pilate, being truly and certainly accomplished by Jesus Christ." [1] Time and again, Ignatius affirmed the basic tenets of the New Testament gospels. For instance, in his Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, he wrote:

I glorify God, even Jesus Christ, who has given you such wisdom. For I have observed that ye are perfected in an immovable faith, as if ye were nailed to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, both in the flesh and in the spirit, and are established in love through the blood of Christ, being fully persuaded with respect to our Lord, that He was truly of the seed of David according to the flesh, and the Son of God according to the will and power of God; that He was truly born of a virgin, was baptized by John, in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by Him; and was truly, under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch, nailed [to the cross] for us in His flesh. Of this fruit we are by His divinely-blessed passion, that He might set up a standard for all ages, through His resurrection, to all His holy and faithful [followers], whether among Jews or Gentiles, in the one body of His Church. [2]

Of note is the fact that a great number of early Christians were so convinced of the truthfulness of the gospel accounts, that they gave their lives as martyrs as a result. (Ignatius himself died as a martyr.) It is impossible to imagine they would have done so for something they knew was a fable. “The disciples’ [and by extension the early Christians’] willingness to suffer and die for their beliefs indicates that they certainly regarded those beliefs as true. . . Liars make poor martyrs.”[3]

Second, we would expect to find details about Jesus in Jewish literature, since the Jews were eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus’ life and death (cf. Luke 24:18). Peter underscored the Jews’ familiarity with Jesus in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:22–23). If such momentous events actually occurred, as are found in the gospel accounts, it would follow that the Jews made mention of such things.

And they did. Jewish sources such as Josephus (37–100), the Mishna, and the Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) indicate that the Jews were familiar with Jesus, His miracles, His death, and the claims regarding both His virgin birth and His resurrection. While they did not respond to these things in faith, they also never responded in a way that questioned the historicity of Jesus. Rather, their testimony only adds credibility to the reliability of the New Testament accounts. In the words of Princeton scholar Peter Schäfer, “The rabbinic sources (again, particularly the Bavli) do not refer to some vague ideas about Jesus and Christianity but they reveal knowledge—more often than not a precise knowledge—of the New Testament.”[4] In other words, the depiction of Jesus in rabbinic literature (although negative in its opinion about Jesus) accords with the picture of Jesus presented in the biblical gospels.

Ancient Roman sources, too, confirm the historical validity of the main points of Jesus’ life. Thallus (first century), Celsus (second century), Lucian of Samosata (115–200), Porphyry of Tyre (b. A.D. 233), Suetonius (c. 70–130), Pliny the Younger (c. 63–113), and others provide secular Roman testimony to the fact that Jesus really lived. The details they share about Jesus, though sometimes sparse, coincide with the New Testament gospel accounts. As New Testament scholar Gary Habermas observes, “We should realize that it is quite extraordinary that we could provide a broad outline of most of the major facts of Jesus life from ‘secular’ history alone. Such is surely significant.”[5]

As one example, the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (c. 55–120) wrote about the fact that Jesus was a real historical figure and that He was put to death under Pontius Pilate. In referring to “the persons commonly called Christians,” Tacitus recounts that “Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius.”[6] This, of course, corresponds to the accounts given by the New Testament writers (cf. Matt. 27:2; Mark 15:15; Luke 3:1; John 18:29).

For the sake of space, we will not belabor this point much longer. However, the fact is that when we include the both biblical and non-biblical sources, “what we have concerning Jesus actually is impressive. . . . In all, at least forty-two authors, nine of them secular, mention Jesus within 150 years of his death.”[7] Moreover, the ancient non-biblical sources affirm the major tenets of Jesus’ life as told in the New Testament gospels. In the words of historian Edwin Yamauchi:

Even if we did not have the New Testament of Christian writings, we would be able to conclude from such non-Christian writings as Josephus, the Talmud, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger that: (1) Jesus was a Jewish teacher; (2) many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms; (3) he was rejected by the Jewish leaders; (4) he was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; (5) despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by A.D. 64; (6) all kinds of people from the cities and countryside—men and women, slave and free—worshipped him as God by the beginning of the second century.[8]

Thus, the testimony of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is collaborated by a veritable cloud of non-biblical witnesses.

* * * *

Notes:

[1] Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, chapter 11 (shorter recension). We would follow the opinion of William R. Schoedel, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:384-385, who contends that the shorter (middle) recension of Ignatius most accurately reflects his original letters.

[2] Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, chapter 1. Shorter recension.

[3] Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 59.

[4] Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 122.

[5] Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1996), 224.

[6] *Annals* XV, 44; cited from Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 120-21.

[7] Habermas and Licona, 127.

[8] Edwin Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament: What Is the Evidence?" in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 221.

What about Those Other Gospels?

September 27th, 2007

(By Nathan Busenitz)

This is the next installment in our series on why we can trust the New Testament gospel accounts. Today we consider a ninth reason in our list of ten.

Ninth, the biblical gospels are clearly superior to other supposed gospels.

It sometimes surprises, or even frightens, contemporary Christians to learn that there are other "gospels" outside of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But they need not be afraid. "The apocryphal gospels, even the earliest and soberest among them, can hardly be compared with the canonical gospels. The former are all patently secondary and legendary and obviously slanted." [1] Of these extra-biblical traditions about Jesus, "only a tiny proportion have even a slight claim to being genuine. The vast majority of the material is quite worthless as a historical source for knowledge of Jesus, and their real value lies more in highlighting the quality of information preserved in the canonical gospels themselves." [2]

It is possible, of course, that we might find some factual accounts about Jesus outside of the biblical gospels. The gospels do not claim to be exhaustive biographies of the life of Jesus. In fact, John closes his gospel by stating: "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" (John 21:25). What the gospels do claim, however, is that the information they provide is both accurate and sufficient, so that when you read them "you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4).



It is also important to recognize that the New Testament continually warns against the reality of false teachers—those who would distort the truth for their own gain. In their letters, the apostles warned their readers about the danger of certain heresies, including lies that might affect their understanding of Jesus and His redemptive work (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:13–14 Gal. 1:6–10; Col. 2:4; 1 Tim. 4:7; 1 John 4:1–3; 2 Peter 1:16; Jude 3–4).

Among these heresies, gnosticism was a growing concern. “The name *gnosticism* comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning ‘knowledge,’ and stresses the character of this heresy. Gnosticism was a philosophical system built upon Greek philosophy that stressed matter was evil but spirit was good.”[3] The gnostics believed that matter was evil, which caused them to reinterpret and distort the incarnation of Christ. If matter is evil but Christ is good, the gnostics reasoned, then He could not have possessed a physical body. To solve this problem the gnostics invented two possible explanations: “one view was that because matter was evil, Jesus could not have actually come in human form; He only appeared in human form and only appeared to suffer. The other view suggested that the divine Logos came upon the human Jesus [at His baptism] and departed prior to the crucifixion.”[4]

In either case, the gnostic view of Jesus was completely incompatible with that taught by the apostles (cf. Titus 3:9; 1 Tim. 4:3). In the words of the apostle John, “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2–3). Paul likewise warned Timothy to “avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’ [*gnosis*]” (1 Tim. 6:20).

The gnostic gospels, along with other grossly imaginative accounts of the life of Jesus Christ, were rightly rejected by the early Christians.

The emergence of documents with strange fairy-tale-like stories about Jesus and skewed theological ideas in works such as the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, and indeed the Gospel of Truth (which in fact is not a gospel in the sense of Gospel genre but more of a theological treatise) bear witness to the necessity in the church for authoritative Gospels to combat the growth of deviant views and fanciful legends concerning Jesus. To peruse these noncanonical documents and reflect on the stories about Jesus preserved in them and other early documents gives the reader the immediate sense of the genuine reserve and feeling of authenticity that is present in the canonical presentations concerning Jesus.[5]

Following the warning of the apostles, the early church rejected these gospels. They were either so fanciful or so theologically skewed (by gnosticism or the like) that their historical authenticity was clearly lacking. In some cases, such as the Gospel of Thomas, they are little more than a collection of sayings, and therefore not really “gospels” at all.

By contrast, the four New Testament Gospels all contain orderly accounts of the birth, life, deeds, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They also point to the glorious “good news” of redemption in Jesus Christ, and are therefore “gospels” in the truest sense of the word.[6]

The New Testament gospels are clearly superior—both in terms of being straightforward accounts of Jesus’ life, and also by being theologically consistent with what the apostles taught in the rest of the New Testament. This again affirms the trustworthiness of the NT gospels, and helps explain why the early Christians, from the earliest points of church history, were able to distinguish between the true gospels and the counterfeits.

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Notes:

[1] Edwin Yamauchi, cited in Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 311.

[2] J. W. Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2000), 227.

[3] Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 415.

[4] Ibid., 416.

[5] G. L. Borchert, *John 1-11* NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 33.

[6] Ron Rhodes, “Crash Goes the Da Vinci Code,” [Online Source](#).

Have the Gospels Survived?

October 16th, 2007

(By Nathan Busenitz)

Today’s post is Part 10 of our ten-part series on why we can trust the reliability of the New Testament Gospels. Earlier parts of the series can be found here: [Parts 1-6](#); [Part 7](#); [Part 8](#); [Part 9](#).

Tenth, we believe the New Testament Gospels are reliable because they have been faithfully preserved throughout church history.

Up to this point, we have considered various reasons why the New Testament Gospels can be rightly considered to be historically reliable documents. But all of this is predicated on the fact that those Gospels have been adequately preserved throughout history, such that the copies we have today accurately reflect the originals. If the Gospels had been irrevocably corrupted at some point in church history, we would not be able to trust the copies we now possess.

In point of fact, the New Testament documents (including the Gospels) have been preserved remarkably well. This, of course, is not true of all ancient documents. Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* can boast only ten extant manuscripts, the oldest of which is dated 1,000 years after the original. Only eight surviving manuscripts have been found of Herodotus’ *History*, the earliest of which is 1,300 years newer than the original. Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* is similarly attested to by only eight extant manuscripts, again dating from about 1300 years after the work was first penned. And these are just a few examples. [1]

In contrast to secular texts, the New Testament documents (including the Gospels) are very well attested, and from only a short period of time after the originals were penned.

Approximately 5,000 Greek manuscripts, containing all or part of the New Testament, exist. There are 8,000 manuscript copies of the Vulgate (a Latin translation of the Bible done by Jerome from 382–405) and more than 350 copies of Syriac (Christian Aramaic) versions of the New Testament (these originated from 150–250; most of the copies are from the 400s). Besides this, virtually the entire New Testament could be reproduced from citations contained in the works of the early church fathers. There are some thirty-two thousand citations in the writings of the Fathers prior to the Council of Nicea (325).[2]

Among the ancient manuscripts are the Chester Beatty Papyri (a group of early Christian manuscripts written on papyrus) most of which are dated in the 200s. Three of these codices (or *books*) of papyri contain portions of the New Testament. The first (known as “p45”) originally consisted of about 220 leaves and contained all four Gospels and Acts. The second (“p46”) had 104 leaves and included ten of Paul’s epistles. And the third (“p47”) is thought to have had 32 leaves, and contained the Book of Revelation. Today only a portion of those codices remain (around 126 leaves altogether), yet it is enough to serve as a valuable witness to the reliability of our modern Bibles.



Another important papyrus is “p52.” It is one of the oldest copies of any portion of the New Testament yet found, and contains a few verses from the Gospel of John (dated to between 100-150).[3] Its significance lies in the fact that it “proves the existence and use of the Fourth Gospel during the first half of the second century in a provincial town along the Nile, far removed from its traditional place of composition (Ephesus in Asia Minor).”[4] The finding of this fragment shattered liberal theories about a late second-century date for the composition of John’s gospel.

The Bodmer Papyri also warrant mentioning. One of them, “p66” contains a large portion of the Gospel of John (of which John 1:1–6:11 and 6:35b–14:15 are still in tact) and dates from around 200. Another Bodmer papyrus “p77” includes Luke and John (of the original 144 pages, 102 have survived) and dates to between 175 and 225. It is the earliest known copy of the Gospel of Luke. In 1994, one other early papyrus was discovered by a German scholar named Carsten Peter Thiede. Though only fragments remained, it contained the Gospel of Matthew and may date to as early as A.D. 70.

That any manuscripts survived from the few centuries of church history is remarkable, since it was a time of such intense persecution for Christians. From the fourth century on, however, the number of surviving manuscripts becomes much more plentiful. The earliest and most important of these include Codex Sinaiticus (350, which contains almost all of the New Testament), and Codex Vaticanus (325–50), which contains virtually the entire Bible).

Along with these manuscripts and other ancient translations, the records left by the church fathers also confirm that the Gospels have been faithfully preserved. In fact, there are over 19,000 quotations of the New Testament Gospels in the extant writings of the early church fathers.[5] Their testimony bears witness to the fact that the Jesus they worshipped is the same Jesus we worship today.

Of course, there are sometimes discrepancies among the manuscripts that have survived. This is to be expected, given the thousands of copies that were handwritten throughout history. Such discrepancies, then, are due to scribal errors that were made (at various points in church history) as the manuscripts were being manually reproduced.

But Christians need not worry too much about them. For starters, the vast majority of them are very minor (such as a word added here, or a word missing there). Most have been readily explained and corrected, through the science of textual criticism. And none of them pose a serious threat to any major Christian doctrine. The fact that there are so many manuscripts available to examine, some of which are very early, has enabled “textual scholars to accurately reconstruct the original text with more than 99 percent accuracy. [One] noted Greek scholar, A. T. Robertson, said the real concerns of textual criticism is on ‘a thousandth part of the entire text’ (making the New Testament 99.9 percent pure).”[6]

We can have confidence, then, in knowing that the Gospels we read today are faithful representations of the original Gospels, though we are separated by 2,000 years and by translation from Greek to English. Thus, we can trust the historical reliability not only of the original Gospel accounts—but more significantly (to us), of our own English copies. In the words of Frederic Kenyon:

The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries.[7]

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Notes:

[1] Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Old Tappan, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Col, 1963), 180. Bruce notes, “There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament” (p. 178). See also the chart by Josh McDowell in *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 38.

[2] J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 135–36.

[3] Cf. Carsten Peter Thiede, *The Jesus Papyrus* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996).

[4] Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 39. Metzger's work was the primary source consulted for information on these papyri.

[5] Josh McDowell, *Evidence*, 43.

[6] Ravi Zacharias and Norman L. Geisler, *Who Made God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 127.

[7] Frederic G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1958), 23.