

The Gospel Truth

Why Christians have far more reason to trust the Gospels than skeptics have to challenge them



Around Easter each year, you might see the latest TV special to herald “new” discoveries about Jesus. Various experts—who are often fairly skeptical about the Gospels—get airtime to promote their views. Some viewers watching these programs will not even realize an important fact—which is that many scholars have a much healthier respect for the Gospels and what they tell us about Jesus than these so-called experts have.

Some programs have focused on recently discovered “Gospels,” such as the Gospel of Judas, without telling viewers that the works on which these so-called Gospels depend were written too long after Jesus’ time to be dependable sources about His life.

Whom should we believe? It turns out that the Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—are the best place to start. Most scholars recognize that their writings are the earliest surviving works that tell us very much about Jesus—and they have quite a lot to tell us about Jesus. Though some skeptics dismiss trust in the Gospels as a Christian bias, we have good reasons to consider skepticism a more serious cause of bias.

BIOGRAPHIES ABOUT JESUS

Most readers through history have considered the Gospels biographies. Scholars today usually accept them as biographies, with the obvious caveat that the Gospels’ authors composed them as ancient biographies rather than modern ones.

Crosscultural differences abound:

- Modern biographies typically start with the person's background and birth; although some ancient biographies included these (as do the Gospels of Matthew and Luke). Others simply started with the person's adult career or work (as with the Gospel of Mark).
- Modern biographies are in chronological order. Ancient biographers, however, often arranged their accounts according to topic. It should thus come as no surprise to us that Matthew (who is particularly organized when it comes to topics) sometimes has events in a different sequence than Mark or Luke.
- Modern biographers strive for verbatim quotations where these are available; ancients valued paraphrase that preserved the gist. There is thus no surprise that the Gospels sometimes vary in wording when they report the same sayings but overlap so often in the sayings that they report.
- Finally, ancient biographers wanted to teach lessons through the historical information they narrated; most had a greater sense of moral responsibility in what they were teaching than modern writers do.

But ancient biographies, like modern ones, were meant to recount historical information; if one wrote a biography, one was supposed to rely on genuine information. Biography was related to the genre of history, and ancient historians, like modern ones, were not supposed to invent events in people's lives. They could select and tell them in their own way; that is why we have four Gospels rather than just one.

Biographers were not novelists. Ancient novelists did not need to depend on prior information. They would not have written gospels that overlap the way Matthew, Mark and Luke do. They rarely wrote about real historical characters, and they never wrote about recent ones such as Jesus. Most of them were not even interested in teaching lessons, as biographers were.

How accurate were ancient biographers?

When ancient historians and biographers wrote about figures of the past generation or two—within living memory of the eyewitnesses—they often proved strikingly accurate. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did not write about someone who lived many centuries before them but within a period when eyewitness testimony remained. If the Gospels were biographies of someone besides Jesus, most people would accept most of what they say.

JESUS THE TEACHER

Whatever else people think about Jesus, even the most skeptical usually recognize that He was a teacher who taught disciples. If He was a teacher, however, first- and second-generation biographies should have accurately preserved His teachings.

In the modern West we often have short memories, driven by sound bites. In the ancient Mediterranean world, however, many people had long memories. Illiterate storytellers memorized and recited entire epics. Professional public speakers memorized their speeches in advance. Like the epics, these speeches could be hours long.

Some people showed off their trained memories—like the man who at the end of a daylong auction rattled off every item that was sold, along with its price and buyer, from memory. Memory was part of even basic education. Boys learned sayings of famous teachers by heart.

More relevant to the case of Jesus' disciples, students at more advanced levels sometimes memorized speeches and passages. They especially learned the teachings of their mentors, often practicing them carefully so as to be able to repeat them back. Sages expected their disciples to pass on their teachings accurately; even students who eventually disagreed with their teachers did not want to misrepresent them. Different schools of philosophy preserved the teachings of their founders.

Most relevant of all, Jewish disciples were known for passing on their sages' teachings. Though some came from more educated backgrounds than others, passing on traditions carefully was their primary job as disciples. Jewish people were so *known* for passing on their ideas that some gentiles considered them a nation of philosophers.

These practices did not depend on a single disciple's memory but on the collective memory of all the disciples together. Although we cannot know for sure, ancient tradition suggests that one of Jesus' disciples, a tax collector, even took notes on His teaching.

Since note-taking was common among ancient disciples who were literate, this is a serious possibility. If these teachings were passed on by disciples of any other teacher besides Jesus, most people would accept most of what they report Jesus said.

LUKE'S SOURCES

Historians are only as good as their sources, and in Jesus' case we are dealing with very valuable sources. Luke tells us that by the time he wrote his Gospel, "many" had already written accounts about Jesus (see Luke 1:1). Unfortunately, most of these sources are now lost (the other "gospels" people talk about were written much later, most of them centuries later). Happily, most scholars believe that Luke used some of the earliest works, including Mark and another work, now lost, that was also used by Matthew.

Most scholars today date the Gospel of Mark to within a generation of Jesus' public ministry. We have only a handful of surviving biographies about ancient figures written within a generation of the events; though, as we have noted, these early biographies tend to be the most reliable. If Mark was as reliable as another biographer from this period I examined, we should expect *hundreds* of places where Mark depends on earlier

source material. Fairly early Christian tradition even claims that most of his accounts go back to Peter.

Luke also notes that much of his material was passed on from eyewitnesses (see Luke 1:2). We have already discussed how reliably people could pass on teachers' sayings. Jesus' disciples remained within positions of leadership in the Jerusalem church for decades; Paul mentions the leadership of Peter and others possibly within a decade of when the first Gospel was written down. Because they were disciples whose role was to pass on Jesus' teachings, they would repeat these teachings often. Then, as today, historians normally checked with eyewitnesses.

Luke also writes that he was confirming what his audience already knew (see Luke 1:3-4). Luke's audience already knew these stories about Jesus; they were in wide circulation, and he could not make them up. He could, however, check them. Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, suggests that Luke spent up to two years in Judea with Paul, which gave him more than enough time to check out the accounts that he records in his Gospel.

Some more skeptical scholars try to deny that Luke was genuinely present during the times that include "we," but scholars of ancient history have shown that "we" in ancient historical works almost always meant that the author was present.

JEWISH SAYINGS



The Gospel writers did not make up sayings for Jesus. Otherwise they would have invented sayings to resolve the debates of their day, such as whether to circumcise Gentiles. In fact, many of Jesus' teachings reflect Jewish figures of speech from the Holy Land that must go back to the earliest memories about Jesus. Such figures of speech include:

- “Moving mountains”
- a “camel through the eye of a needle”
- “a speck in one’s own eye”
- “Son of Man” (which makes little sense in Greek)
- Outsiders could speak of the “Lake of Galilee,” but only local people called it a “sea.”

Even Jesus’ debates with the Pharisees, who seem to have lived especially in Judea, brim with authenticity. The Pharisees’ question about divorce in Matt. 5: 31-32 reflects precisely a debate between the two schools of Pharisees in Jesus’ day. When Jesus condemns some Pharisees for (figuratively) cleaning the outside of cups and dishes before the inside, He alludes to a debate raging between these two Pharisaic schools in his generation.

WHAT ABOUT THE MIRACLES?

Some skeptics acknowledge all these points, yet protest that the Gospels still cannot be reliable because they report many miracles. Technically, someone could affirm the Gospels as mostly reliable biographies even without believing in miracles as divine acts; it would be enough to recognize that people were cured through Jesus’ ministry.

Many scholars today recognize that such cures happened, in part because virtually *all* ancient sources, including those from Jesus’ enemies, agree people were cured by Him. Jewish historian Josephus wrote a generation after Jesus’ public ministry and claimed Jesus performed “wonders”—the same term Josephus uses for Elisha’s miracles.

In an article for *Charisma* last summer I recounted some eyewitness testimonies of people being raised from the dead. One would be hard-pressed to claim that they were dead merely psychosomatically. Should we expect these sorts of examples to convince everyone? No more than the raising of Lazarus convinced everyone present for it. Yet enough miracles happen

even today to convince those who are open to God's power.

The bottom line is that Christians have far more reason to trust the Gospels than skeptics have to challenge them.

Like other ancient biographies written within a generation or two of the figure they report, the Gospels depend on extensive information. Like other ancient disciples, Jesus' disciples should have accurately preserved His message. And skeptical warnings that miracles must not have happened miss the mark. Miracles are happening every day, at the hands of the same Galilean who performed them two millennia ago.

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