

Why the Gospels can be trusted as evidence for Jesus

Around 1.5 billion people worldwide call themselves Christian, putting their faith in Jesus Christ. According to the Bible, he was a man who was also the divine Son of God, whose mother was a young virgin. Having become a Rabbi, he spent the last years of his life teaching and performing miracles. He was crucified by the Romans, but his body disappeared from the tomb and many people claimed to have met the physically resurrected Jesus.

In addition to the first four books of the New Testament part of the Bible (the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) other non-Biblical documents contain reference to the existence of Jesus. Josephus, a Jewish historian mentions many individuals who are also referred to in the Gospels including “James, the brother of the so-called Christ”¹. Also, Thallus, writing around AD 52, included reference to Jesus’ crucifixion. These independent writings help verify some of the content of the Gospels, not least that Jesus existed.

There are two major issues when considering the reliability of the Gospels; whether the authors of the documents were accurately reporting events as they occurred, and whether the documents as we have them today are accurate and authentic copies of the originals.

Authenticity of the Gospel Manuscripts

To address the second of these issues, the authenticity of any ancient document is measured by the time span between documents being written and the earliest known fragment or copy, and the number of manuscript copies available.

The New Testament was written between AD 40-100, and the earliest known copies are dated AD 125, giving a time span of between 25 – 85 years. As for the number of manuscripts, there are over 5,000 handwritten copies in the Greek language alone. By

¹ Orr-Ewing, *Why Trust the Bible*, p52

comparison, the works of Plato, written between 427 – 347 BC have the earliest copies dated at AD 900, a time span of 1,200 years and only 7 known manuscript copies².

Sir Frederic G Kenyon, a former director and principal librarian of the British Museum believes, on this basis, “both the authenticity and general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established³.”

Language of the Gospels

Although Jesus spoke Aramaic, the Gospels were originally written in Greek. However, the Gospels do record some Aramaic words and phrases which Jesus spoke, for example “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” (Matthew 27:45) and “Talitha Koum” (Mark 5:41).

Other parts of the Gospels, when translated back from Greek to Aramaic, have literary form that only makes sense in the original language. Jesus’ most well-known teaching, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is an example of Aramaic poetry. While this doesn’t necessarily prove Jesus spoke the words attributed to him, the literary features in the original language add yet more evidence of authenticity to the Gospel texts.

Reliability of the Gospel Content

If, for the moment, we assume that the Gospel writers didn’t set out to deceive people by deliberately fabricating the Gospels, we can be sure that they did thoroughly research their material. In the introduction to his Gospel, Luke tells Theophilus (to whom the Gospel is addressed) that he “carefully investigated everything...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3-4). Luke was an educated man, probably a medical doctor and therefore not someone who was likely to be taken in easily, especially after claiming through research. If he had been tricked, his reputation would have been seriously damaged.

² Orr-Ewing, *Why Trust the Bible*, p39

³ Kenyon, *Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, p4

There still leaves the possibility that the Gospels were fabricated by Jesus' disciples, because they wanted to justify their following of a man who turned out to be a false prophet. Maybe they embellished accounts of true events to spice up reality and ensure their importance would be noticed.

On examining these claims, neither holds any weight. There are many occasions in the Gospels where Jesus rebuked the disciples, or criticised them. For example, when Peter, one of his closest followers is upset by Jesus predicting his death, Jesus refers to him as Satan, and tells him he is not focussed on God's bigger picture. (Matthew 16:23). There is no logical reason why the disciples would allow themselves to have been portrayed in such a bad light if they were involved in the fabrication of the documents.

Similarly, one could argue that the Gospels were doctored by the early church to add weight to their teaching. But there are flaws with this argument. For example, Baptism has since the early church through to the present day been the method of initiation into the Christian community. Yet Jesus is not recorded as having baptised anyone, and other than an instruction to his disciples to "baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19) the issue doesn't make any feature in Jesus' teaching.

There are also other questions the early church grappled with, for example, whether non-Jewish converts to Christianity should be circumcised. Such debates could have been resolved easily if people were inventing sayings of Jesus to fit their own convictions.

The Gospels: Fact or Fiction?

The Gospels do not give a verbatim account of everything Jesus said or did, but that was not their intention. They were written so "that you may believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (John 20:31).

We cannot claim to know everything about Jesus. The Gospels are “portraits rather than photographs⁴” but that doesn’t mean they are unreliable. These documents pass the authenticity test better than other ancient secular literature. There is no evidence or logical argument to suggest that they were fabricated either by their authors or that they were altered after they were written. Having weighed up the evidence, I believe the Gospel documents can certainly be trusted as evidence for Jesus.

⁴ Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, p227

Why the Gospels cannot be trusted as evidence for Jesus

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are considered by Christians to be the authoritative texts on the life of Jesus Christ, a Jewish man who lived during the first century and claimed to be the Son of God. He ended up being executed by the Roman authorities, as recorded by Tacitus who wrote a history of Rome, and other secular ancient writings.

We therefore know that Jesus did exist, but the information we have about him is at best patchy, and I do not believe that the Gospels offer the most reliable evidence of how Jesus lived his life.

Why were the Gospels written?

Firstly, let's look at who wrote the Gospels, and the purpose behind them. All four Gospel authors believed Jesus' claims to be the Christ. Matthew opens his writing by tracing the genealogy of "Jesus who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:17). Luke's Gospel is written to someone called Theophilus so that he "may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4) while Mark states that he writes about "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). John's Gospel is "written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). None of the Gospels therefore offer independent evidence. They are all written from one perspective with the declared intention of wanting to convince their readers that they are correct.

It follows then that the Gospel writers either fabricated their documents in order to make their stories plausible, or they, at least were extremely selective as to what material they included and left out of their writings. John's Gospel even admits to making omissions (John 20:30).

Because the Gospels were written after the events, this gave the writers the scope to put an altered reality on events to make the story fit the message they wanted to give. For example, the disciples would have known the Old Testament prophecies about the Christ, such as he would be born to a virgin (Isaiah 7:14) and written the text of the

Gospels accordingly to allow the prophecy to be seen as having been fulfilled. Given that only Matthew's and Luke's Gospel record the story of the birth of Jesus, and Matthew explicitly says this took place to "fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet" (Matthew 1:22) makes this possibility even more plausible.

Contradictions of the Gospels

Another problem with the way the Gospels were written is that it is all second-hand accounts of Jesus' life. He didn't write anything himself, so even what is written about him is open to interpretation and manipulation by those writing. We also know that the Gospels were written many years after Jesus' death so we also have the infallible human memory to factor into the equation. There is also the issue of language. Jesus is likely to have spoken Aramaic, yet the Gospels were written in Greek. If we are then reading the texts in English, there is little doubt that certain phrases and connotations will have been lost in translation. All of these factors combined may explain the differences in accounts between the Gospels.

Take for example Jesus' teaching of the Lord's Prayer. (Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4). Although broadly similar, Matthew's account is more detailed including references to heaven which Luke omits. This leaves many questions. Are these two separate occasions being reported? Did either Luke forget or mishear what Jesus said? Did Matthew have a particular interest in heaven so he doctored the text to make people think Jesus spoke on this issue too?

There are even more obvious contradictions found in the Gospels, for example the accounts of Jesus' resurrection. John records that Jesus appeared to the disciples in a locked room (John 20:19) while Matthew suggests he met them on a mountain. Mark suggests he appeared whilst the disciples were eating.

Whilst it is possible to understand and explain a small omission or mistranslation which the Lord's Prayer gives, it is more difficult to understand how the accounts of where the risen Jesus first met the disciples. All these unanswered questions suggest that we can't rely on the Gospels to provide accurate and reliable evidence of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus' miracles

From walking on water and healing the sick, to turning water into wine and feeding thousands of people with one boy's lunch, the Gospels tell us that Jesus performed many miracles or supernatural actions. After some of these miracles, Jesus is recorded as telling those present not to tell people what had happened, for example, when Jairus' daughter was raised from the dead. (Luke 8:56). On other occasions such as when the ten men with leprosy were healed, he wanted people to talk about his miracles. (Luke 17:14).

Again, these inconsistencies make it difficult to understand what was really going on, if anything. If Jesus was able to do such miraculous things, surely he would want others to know, if only to bring people closer to God the Father. Including an instruction not to tell others, helps answer the question why there was not more public intrigue in Jesus when people heard about these amazing actions. This leaves open the possibility that these events didn't really happen, at least in the way they were recorded.

How reliable are the Gospels?

While the Gospels do offer information about the life of Jesus, we have to remember that they are biased in their approach, and make significant contradictions in how they report key events and teachings attributed to Jesus.

The content of the Gospels is based on second-hand evidence at best, and the texts we have today will have certainly been through numerous translations and mistranslations making it almost impossible to understand the original meaning which the writers intended.

The Gospels therefore may add some value to what we know about Jesus, but I do not believe they offer the reliable and infallible evidence that they are accredited for.

WORD COUNT: 1,000 + 992 = 1,992

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