

Introduction

- The Gospels are not neutral documents: they claim to present an historical Jesus not only as a moral teacher, but as a crucified Messiah and risen Lord who calls people from every nation to take up their cross and follow him. They are either deeply deceptive, well-intentioned but delusional, or they are indeed true.
- The Gospels are on trial: can they be trusted?

The Nature of our Question

- Our question is not “can we *prove* the gospels”?
- Our question is: “can we *trust* the gospels?”
- 99% of our functioning as human beings is based on trust. How many of us have personally seen the earth from outer space? And yet we trust scientists’ accounts that the earth is not flat.
- Trust = firm belief in the reliability or truth of a person.
- My wife can never be 100% certain that I have not poisoned her tea. But she still trusts me to make her a warm cuppa every morning. My promise to her before God and trusted witnesses on our wedding day, and my proven love to her every day gives evidence beyond reasonable doubt that she can trust me with her life.
- Can we trust the authors of the gospels in this way? Can we trust the Jesus whom the gospel authors claims is speaking through these texts?
- Do the gospel authors give us evidence beyond reasonable doubt that they are communicating historical truth in their texts?
- Does the church, who has handed down these texts for 2,000 years, give us evidence beyond reasonable doubt that they have faithfully transmitted these texts?
- Does Jesus Christ, speaking through the gospels, give us evidence beyond reasonable doubt that he is communicating eternal, salvific truth?

Can the Gospels be trusted? Yes! Why?

Reason 1: The four Gospels are ancient historiography (probably biographies) written within living memory of the events, based on eyewitness testimony.

- Living memory: 40 to 80 years after the event = 70 to 110 AD. Eyewitnesses and disciples of eyewitnesses are alive and have the role of controlling the process of social memory and recollection. Luke 1:1-4 describes this process of early gospel writing.
- The early dates of the gospels:
 - Mark: written around 70 AD
 - Peter as the primary eyewitness (Papias [110 AD], Irenaeus [180 AD], and Clement of Alexandria [190 AD] preserve this tradition, and Justin Martyr [150 CE] alludes to it).
 - Matthew, Luke, and John develop Mark’s structure, presupposing Mark’s earlier existence.
 - Testimony from Papias and contemporaries, ca. 110 AD.
 - Matthew: written around 80 AD

- Matthew as eyewitness (Papias, Irenaeus, and Clement preserve this tradition, and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas [ca. 130-160 AD] alludes to it).
- Testimony from Papias and contemporaries, ca. 110 AD.
- Influence of Matthew's gospel on Christian literature dating from 100-150 AD from Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Rome, and probably Palestine.
- Luke: written around 80 AD
 - Deliberately consulted eyewitnesses and their accounts (1:1-4).
 - By some accounts, combines Mark's structure with Matthew's sayings, and presupposes both Matthew's and Mark's earlier existence.
 - Testimony from Papias' contemporaries, ca. 120 AD.
 - Influence of Luke's gospel on Christian literature dating from 100-150 AD from Egypt, Asia Minor, Rome, and probably Palestine.
- John: written around 90-100 AD
 - Claims to be written by an eyewitness (1:14; 19:36-37; 21:24-25).
 - Testimony from Papias' contemporaries, ca. 120 AD.
 - Influence of John's gospel on Christian literature dating from 100-150 AD from Egypt, Asia Minor.
- Signs of legitimate eyewitness testimony:
 - Geography: most city and town names (26 in total) are confirmed by contemporaneous sources (Josephus, Rabbinic sources). Ancient authors did not have google maps to check what city names were! But the gospel authors know of small villages (e.g. Bethany, Bethphage, Cana), specific locations (e.g. Mount of Olives, Sheep Gate, Solomon's Colonnade, Golgotha, Gabbatha, field of blood, etc.) as well as bigger cities (e.g. Tiberias, Caesarea Philippi, Capernaum, etc.).
 - Topography: "going up" to Jerusalem" (Matt 20:17; Mark 10:32; Luke 2:4) "going down" from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30-31), "going down" from Cana to Capernaum (John 4:47), "going down" from Nazareth to Capernaum (Luke 4:31).
 - Personal names: Simon *Peter*, James and John the *sons of Zebedee*, Mary *Magdalene*, Judas *Iscaiot*, Jesus *of Nazareth*, the *son of Joseph* – common names of the era have disambiguation.
 - Socio-political and cultural contexts:
 - Roman occupation.
 - Jewish biblical interpretation, feasts, sects, etc.
 - Botanical, horticultural, finance, and fisherman's terms.
- ***Conclusion: the Christian movement claimed early on that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written by eyewitnesses or immediate associates of eyewitnesses, and Luke and John claim this explicitly. The texts of all four gospels give us evidence beyond reasonable doubt that the accounts they contain derive from first-century residents of Galilee and Jerusalem. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the stories in the gospels derive from first-century followers of Jesus.***

Reason 2: The four Gospels faithfully preserve the words and deeds of the Jesus of history and faith

- Early tradition, guided by the apostles and their associates, preserved the essence of the words and deeds of Jesus (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:21-26; 1 Cor 15:1-11).
- Rabbinic culture of memorizing the words of a teacher provided the context of the disciples memorizing the words of Jesus.
- Not often the *ipsissima verba* (exact words) but always the *ipsissima vox* (exact voice) of Jesus.
- Example: in my itinerant teaching over the course of 2 years across Ethiopia with three colleagues, we regularly taught the same course in many cities, towns, and other settings. Our “disciples” in various cities in about 30 years from now could probably recollect the essential content of our teaching, as well as some exact sayings.
- Gospels as preservation of early Christians’ social *memory* of Jesus.
 - The verb “remember” or “remind” occurs frequently in the gospels (Matt 26:13/Mark 14:9; Luke 22:19; Matt 26:75/Mark 14:72/Luke 22:61; Luke 24:6-8; John 2:22; 12:16; 15:20; 16:4).
 - The verb “remember” also occurs frequently in second-century Christian texts like Papias (110 AD), Justin Martyr (150 AD), the *Epistula Apostolorum* (ca. 150 AD), Irenaeus (180 AD), and Clement of Alexandria (190 AD). Christians for the first 150 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection were deeply concerned about remembering accurately what Jesus did and said.
 - Frequent Components of memory: location (e.g. Nazareth), setting (synagogue liturgy), words (e.g. “today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” – Luke 4:20).
 - The dynamics of remembering Jesus’s words and deeds:
 - “Informal controlled” tradition – *remembering* Jesus in community.
 - Social memory: contemporary circumstances trigger and highlight recollections of the past (the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD would have reminded Christians of what Jesus said about this in 33 AD, the expulsion of Christians from synagogues in 90 AD might have reminded John and his community what Jesus had told them 60 years earlier, etc.)
 - The faith that Christians had in Jesus Christ actually aided their memory rather than hinder it – strong emotional ties to a person make memories of that person more salient.
- The role of the Holy Spirit in bringing to memory the words and deeds of Jesus.
- **Conclusion: *the apostles, their followers, and other eyewitnesses remembered the words of Jesus well into 40 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, and they recollected these memories in community regularly. These stories spread and created a culture of shared memories of Jesus. The gospels were written in this milieu and faithfully preserve the authentic voice and actual deeds of Jesus.***

Reason 3: The text of the Gospels was faithfully transmitted in the first four centuries after their original writing

- How closely do the gospels we have today match the original autograph copies written by Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John?
- Christian culture of textual preservation: “neither adding nor taking away.”

- Christian culture of textuality: commentaries were written on Luke, Matthew, and John in the second century, and these commentaries presupposed a relatively stable text that could be commented on. By the time of Origen (180-250 AD), Christians were starting to do “textual criticism” to find the text most faithful to Jesus’ authentic teaching.
- Early manuscript witnesses:
 - Manuscripts of Matthew within 200 years of its writing = 11
 - Manuscripts of Mark within 200 years of its writing = 3
 - Manuscripts of Luke within 200 years of its writing = 5
 - Manuscripts of John within 200 years of its writing = 16
 - Every one of these manuscripts (some only a few verses, others several chapters long), matches the sequence of paragraphs we see in the full Greek manuscripts of the 4th century, and in the full translations into Coptic, Latin, Syriac, of the 4th and 5th centuries (after which hundreds of more manuscripts maintain the same sequence). We can call this a *macro-level* stability, even if there is textual variation at the micro-level.
- Early Christian witnesses: Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, writing 100-150 years after the gospels were written, comment extensively on all four gospels, and their comments give every indication that they are dealing with the same texts we have today, with macro-level stability and micro-level variation.
- **Conclusion: *the manuscripts agree beyond reasonable doubt on the sequence of paragraphs within the gospels, and on the basic wording of the earliest texts.***

Reason 4: The four Gospels are aesthetically beautiful – they present a picture of the world that makes sense of evil and sin, justice, and human flourishing, and they give a solid hope for restoration and a reason for beauty.

- This was the argument of early Christian apologists who countered the sophisticated attacks of ancient Greek philosophy and Roman political power.
- This is the argument of Muslim background believers who rejected the gospels for years but finally come to see the truth of the gospels after encountering Christ in them.
- **Conclusion: *the most convincing way to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the gospels is to read them, re-read them, memorize them, meditate on them, live by them, and by faith worship Jesus through them. Our faith is supported by reasonable evidence (Reasons 1-3 above). It is not irrational. But it is faith nonetheless. It is trust in the gospel authors to communicate historical truth. It is trust in the communion of saints to hand us down these texts, generation after generation. And ultimately, it is trust in the living Jesus who reveals himself through these texts today as we read them.***

Resources:

Peter Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (2019)

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses.* (2017)

Craig Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (2019)

Charles Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy.* (2010)