



Can the Gospels Be Trusted?

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C.S. Lewis argued that if the gospel is true (if Jesus was the Son of God come in flesh, if He lived a perfect life, performed miracles, died for our sins, was physically raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, and reigns at present as the living Lord), it is of infinite importance. If it is not true, it is of no importance, except as a cultural phenomenon. But it cannot be of moderate importance. The events mentioned above either happened, or they did not. In other words, our faith is rooted in history. Paul Johnson says, “Christianity is essentially a historical religion. It bases its claims on the historical facts it asserts. If these are demolished it is nothing.”¹

So historical evidence is important for establishing the truth of the Gospels, as well as the rest of Scripture.

The Case for Scripture

In fact, a case for the authority of the Bible begins with historical evidence and convincingly ends with the total trustworthiness of Scripture. It goes like this:

Premise A: The Bible is at least a generally reliable document. You can establish this (as you would for any other historical document) by looking at the bibliographical test (textual reliability), the internal test (what it claims about its sources), and the external test (outsider verification, archeological evidence, etc.). There are many books about each of these tests. (Start with Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Thomas Nelson, 1993.)

Premise B: Jesus is a messenger sent from God. Assuming that the Bible is at least generally reliable, you could then look at various lines of evidence pointing to Jesus as someone sent from God

to speak truth to us. He is certainly more than that, but that’s all you need to establish for now. You would use such evidence from prophecy (332 prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament), miracles, and particularly His resurrection. Again, many books have been written on these topics. (Start with Lee Stroebel, *The Case for Christ*, Zondervan, 1998.)



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Premise C: Jesus teaches that the Bible is totally trustworthy. Again, assuming general reliability, you can show that Jesus teaches that the Bible is more than generally reliable; in fact, totally trustworthy or absolutely authoritative. In about two hundred passages in the Gospels Jesus teaches either explicitly or implicitly a very high view of the trustworthiness of the Old Testament. (See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, Baker, 1994, or R.T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, InterVarsity Press, 1971.) There are also numerous passages in which Jesus affirms the apostles’ authority and promises to send the Spirit to teach them everything they need to know for the future.

Conclusion: The Bible is totally trustworthy. The conclusion is as strong as the evidences mustered in the above premises.

The Reliability of the Gospels

I can’t in this short article provide a defense of questions about this approach or provide all the evidences required. So I will focus on one aspect of the “internal” test: the reliability of the Gospels, particularly the

charge (made by Rudolf Bultmann, the Jesus Seminar, and many liberal theologians) that the character of Jesus was largely invented by the early church. What can be said to such a charge? Here are just a few—of many—helpful arguments to show that the character of Jesus is real and not created by the early writers and their communities.

1. Inventing the character of Jesus would involve a miracle. Several quotations from nonbelieving authors make the point that it would take a Jesus to invent a Jesus.

- Theodore Parker: “It takes a Newton to forge a Newton. What man could have fabricated a Jesus? No one but a Jesus.”

- Rousseau: “The Gospel has marks of truth so great, so striking, so perfectly inimitable that the inventor would be more astonishing than the hero.”

- John Stuart Mill: “It is of no use to say that Christ as exhibited in the Gospels is not historical, and that we know not how much of what is admirable has been superadded by the tradition of His followers. *Who among His disciples or among their proselytes was capable of inventing the life and character revealed in the Gospels?*”

2. The importance of eyewitnesses. When the Gospels were written, there were eyewitnesses still alive who could have corrected any mistakes by saying, “That didn’t happen,” or, “It didn’t happen that way.” The apostles were key eyewitnesses who had intimate acquaintance with what Jesus said and did. As the first generation passed away, the criteria of whether a story could be verified as coming from an eyewitness was crucial. (See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Eerdmans, 2006.) A radical criticism about the lack of eyewitnesses holds no ground; for it to have been correct, the disciples (and other eyewitnesses) must have been translated to heaven after the resurrection. (They were not.)

3. According to tradition, all of the apostles, except for John, were killed as martyrs. There are many cases of people willingly dying for that which they believe to be true (even though it is a lie). But it is inconceivable that so many men would violently die (become martyrs) for a story they knew to be a lie. Not only did most of the apostles die as martyrs; some were repeatedly imprisoned and tortured. Peter is said to have asked to be crucified upside down because he didn’t feel worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. James was stoned. Paul is said to have been beheaded in Rome. They all went to their deaths without reneging on their strong confession of the truth of the gospel.

Chuck Colson’s book *Loving God* includes a chapter titled “Watergate and the Resurrection.” At the time of the Nixon-administration Watergate scandal, a number of White House staff members, including Colson, were accused of obstruction of justice because they withheld knowledge of a crime (the Watergate burglary). John Dean (one of the staff) got immunity from prosecution for testifying before Congress. Colson says that other staff members were crawling over each other to get similar immunity. Such a “conspiracy” of silence fell apart easily at the threat of a short prison term. (Colson got nine months.) These staffers were not threatened with torture or death. Colson points out how much more quickly a “conspiracy” to make up the stories about Jesus would fall apart under that more serious threat (torture and death).

4. The time for the creation of “mythical” material was too short. Jesus died about AD 30. The Gospel of Mark was written in the sixties if not in the fifties. Paul received his tradition (1 Cor. 15:3–5) in the mid-thirties and wrote some of his epistles in the early fifties. This timetable doesn’t allow for the creation of sagas, legends, and myths. The development of German folklore required centuries. Yet the message of the gospel exploded into life, fully grown at birth.

5. Failure to take into account the Jewish perspective on memory. Some critics imagine a free-flowing situation in the first century that allowed and even encouraged the easy invention of stories about Jesus. However, such a picture is totally contrary to the Middle Eastern and Jewish environment out of which these stories came. In his book *Memory and Manuscript*, Birger Gerhardsson thoroughly documents the importance of memorization for the Jewish mentality, especially the passing on of formal teaching.

The good Jewish student was not to lose a drop from the cistern of the master’s teaching. Right up to this day, the best Jewish student is the one who can recite the rabbinic tradition verbatim on issue after issue. (For a contemporary novel illustrating this phenomenon, read *The Chosen*, by Chaim Potok.) No one was encouraged to play fast and loose with the formal tradition. You were not allowed creative freedom. You were expected to recite word for word. You would be immediately corrected if a single word was wrong.

This careful, exact memorizing also applied to the more informal tradition involving things that were important to community life or stories about the foundation of the community. Feats of memory continue in the Middle East today. Kenneth Bailey lived in the Middle East for sixty years, for part of that time

teaching at a university in Beirut. He points out that memory is still vital to Middle Eastern culture and community life. Even the illiterate peasant knows by heart thousands of lines of proverbs and poetry. For amusement a large number of participants sometimes sit in a circle. The game begins when the first person recites two lines of poetry. The next person has to use the last letter of the last line as the first letter for two other lines of poetry, and so on. Bailey has seen the game played many times, even by those who cannot read, with the challenge traveling several cycles around the circle (of ten to fifteen people) before anyone is stumped or misquotes. If you make even the smallest mistake, you are out, and everyone knows when you have made a mistake.

Some youth leaders tried to bring the American game of “telephone” to the Middle East, but it did not work. In this game a short message is given to the first person, who then whispers that message into the ear of the next person, and so on around the circle. The results are often funny, because the message comes out garbled at the other end. In the Middle East, however, the message came back exactly the same. The kids could not see the fun in the game, because they were trained to hear carefully and repeat exactly.

Many Muslims are encouraged to memorize the Qur’an in Arabic. A translation or paraphrase will not do. It has to be an exact repetition. One of the terrorists from September 11, 2001, was said to have memorized the whole Qur’an. Biblical scholar Bruce Waltke said that he once met a man in Israel who had memorized the whole Old Testament in Hebrew. Waltke tested the man on his knowledge and considered his claim to be credible. But then Waltke was surprised to learn that the man was . . . an atheist.

Informal tradition or stories especially about the beginnings of a community are viewed with great respect and care. To illustrate this point Bailey mentioned a book written about a century ago on the founding of a Christian church in a Middle Eastern community. When he went to visit that community and asked about the founding of the church, the stories he heard matched those in the book, even down to the quotations. The remarkable accuracy was not because the people had read the book, but because the tradition had been passed along with scrupulous care. This mentality was true then (during Jesus’ day) as it is now.

If the formal tradition of a teacher is passed on verbatim and the informal stories, especially about the

founding of community life, are passed on with extreme care, how do we account for the invention of fictional stories about a person named Jesus being touted as true, with no attendant protest, shock, and outrage? It might have happened in some other time or place, but not in Israel and the Middle East. Ken Bailey gave a lecture where he explored these themes of memory (then and now) as over against the critical theories. He closed the lecture by saying, “The Gospels are authentic.”

6. The utter uniqueness of Jesus’ teachings. Some critics accept as authentic only those sayings of Jesus that are unique and not paralleled in contemporary Judaism. In some ways, this is wrongheaded, making Jesus an eccentric with no roots in the tradition. However, if we, for the sake of argument, accept this criteria, it is amazing to note how much of the Gospels is unique.

For instance, Jesus often addressed God as “Father” or even “Abba,” a more familiar address used by children for their dad. The title *Father* is occasionally used of God in the Old Testament. But there is no Jewish parallel to addressing God as “Father” in prayer before, during, or after Jesus’ time. The first recorded instance of a Jew addressing God as Father in prayer (after Jesus) is in Italy in AD 974.

Another example is Jesus’ use of *amen*. In the Gospels every time we see “Truly, I say to you” or “Truly, truly I say to you” (or, in the King James, “verily” or “verily, verily”), the Greek text uses the Hebrew word *amen*. Now *amen* means “it is true, reliable, solid, or without dispute.” All Jews were required to say “amen” when they heard God being praised or thanked. In some churches today people shout “amen” to indicate their agreement with the preacher. It was used that way in Jesus’ day as a congregational response to a prayer or message.

However, note that Jesus precedes His words with an “amen.” Imagine your preacher standing up on Sunday morning and saying, “amen,” or “amen, amen” to preface the sermon. What would that mean? It would mean, “I am not waiting for you as noble Bereans to search the Scriptures and see if you agree with me (adding your amen). I am claiming absolute truthfulness and authority up front.” Scripture says that Jesus spoke “with authority” and not as the scribes. I think He spoke authoritatively, and one of the marks of His authority was prefacing His words with “amen.” I’m sure this infuriated the scribes and Pharisees. He was not looking for their stamp of approval or endorsement of His message. With one exception, there is no recorded parallel to this use of

“amen” to preface a sentence. (The exception is one letter in 700 BC.)

We might ask how Jesus was able to say the “amen” before He spoke. It was because He was the Amen. Revelation 3:14 calls Jesus the “Amen”—the faithful and true witness. He was able to speak the “amen” because He was the Amen—the One who is true, reliable, and solid.

7. The utter uniqueness of Jesus’ parables. There are stories, metaphors, and similes in rabbinic teaching. But there is no parallel to Jesus’ parables (stories about everyday life used to teach theological points) in the intertestamental period (400 BC–AD 30), during Jesus’ life, or immediately afterward. Yet there are some forty-one parables in the Gospels (depending on how you count them). Jesus also used His parables as a weapon to confront spiritually blind people to let them see themselves as if in a mirror (e.g., the Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son).

We could also add other unique features of Jesus’ teaching (such as His characteristic forms of speech)—enough to say that we can accumulate a considerable amount of material by using the criteria of uniqueness.

Conclusion

In light of these and other arguments, the burden of proof is on those who maintain the inauthenticity of the Gospels rather than on those who maintain their authenticity. You can’t prove every specific of the Gospels this way, but there is such an avalanche of evidence that it becomes difficult to avoid being overwhelmed by the cumulative force of the argument for the trustworthiness of the Gospels.

This internal test seems to verify Luke’s claim (1:1–4) that his goal was to write truthfully about what had taken place in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

Notes

1. Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, (New York: Touchstone, 1976), vii

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