

# Evidence for the Historical Jesus

Are the Biblical Records Reliable?

## Critics claim...

- What we call the “New Testament” was written late in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and, being so long after Christ, they couldn’t be reliable.
- First put forward by German critic F. C. Baur.
  - NT came from myths and legends that had developed in the lengthy interval from lifetime of Jesus and the time of writing these accounts

# But new archaeological discoveries were made

- New papyri NT manuscripts found:
  - John Ryland manuscript dated to A.D. 130
  - Chester Beatty Papyri, A.D. 155
  - Bodmer Papyri II, A.D. 200
- When these early texts compared with existing later documents, confidence increased of the accurate transmission of the text of the NT.

- According to William Albright, at one time the world's foremost biblical archaeologist, writes:  
*“We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about A.D. 80...”*

Albright, William F., *Recent Discoveries in Bible Lands*, 1955

- He reiterates his view later:  
*“In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century A.D. (very probably sometime between about A.D. 50 and 75).”*

Albright, William F., “Toward a More Conservative View”, *Christianity Today*, January 18, 1963

- John A. T. Robinson, British Theologian and New Testament scholar concludes that the whole of the New Testament was completed prior to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

# But A.D. 70 is still more than 35 years after the crucifixion of Jesus...

- Couldn't legends and corruptions creep in during that time?
  - Jewish oral tradition: customary for a student to memorize a rabbi's teaching and reference source
    - A good pupil was like "a plastered cistern that loses not a drop"  
*Mishna, Aboth, 2, 8*
    - "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord)..." *1Cor 7:10*
    - "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)..." *1Cor 7:12*
  - Albright concludes "a period of twenty to fifty years is too slight to permit ... any appreciable corruption of the essential content and even of the specific wording of the sayings of Jesus."

# Principals of Historiography

- We can apply tests to examine the evidence
  1. Bibliographical Test
    - Number and agreement of the available texts
  2. Internal Evidence Test
    - Credible? (Hearsay or verified eyewitness?)
  3. External Evidence Test
    - Do other historical documents confirm or dispute?

# Bibliographical Test

- 22,000 ancient copies of New Testament exist today
  - Oldest dates to 250 to 300 years after death of Jesus
- 300 years is a long time
  - How does that compare to other documents from antiquity that we believe are trustworthy?

Greek	
Uncials	267
Miniscules	2,764
Lectionaries	2,143
Papyri	88
Recent finds	47
TOTAL	5,309 Extant Greek MSS
Latin Vulgate	10,000 plus
Ethiopic	2,000 plus
Slavic	4,101
Armenian	2,587
Syriac Pashetta	350 plus
Bohairic	100
Arabic	75
Old Latin	50
Anglo Saxon	7
Gothic	6
Sogdian	3
Old Syriac	2
Persian	2
Frankish	1

AUTHOR	When Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span	No. of Copies
Caesar ( <i>Gallic Wars</i> )	100-44 BC	900 AD	<i>1,000 years</i>	10
Plato ( <i>Tetralogies</i> )	427-347 BC	900 AD	<i>1,200 years</i>	7
Tacitus ( <i>Annals</i> )	100 AD	1100 AD	<i>1,000 years</i>	20
Pliny the Younger ( <i>History</i> )	61-113 AD	850 AD	<i>750 years</i>	7
Thucydides ( <i>History</i> )	460-400 BC	900 AD	<i>1,300 years</i>	8
Suetonius ( <i>De Vita Caesarum</i> )	75-160 AD	950 AD	<i>800 years</i>	8
Herodotus ( <i>History</i> )	480-425 BC	900 AD	<i>1,300 years</i>	8
Sophocles	496-406 BC	1000 AD	<i>1,400 years</i>	193
Catullus	54 BC	1550 AD	<i>1,600 years</i>	3
Euripides	480-406 BC	1100 AD	<i>1,500 years</i>	9
Demosthenes	383-322 BC	1100 AD	<i>1,300 years</i>	200
Aristotle	384-322 BC	1100 AD	<i>1,400 years</i>	49
Aristophanes	450-385 BC	900 AD	<i>1,200 years</i>	10

“Since scholars accept as generally trustworthy the writings of the ancient classics even though the earliest MSS were written so long after the original writings and the number of extant MSS is in many instances so small, it is clear that the reliability of the text of the New Testament is likewise assured.”

J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism.*, 1964

# Internal Evidence Test

- Bibliographical test only proves that text is essentially what was originally recorded
- Still need to determine if that text is credible. What rules are used?

*“The benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, and not arrogated by the critic to himself.”*

Aristotle, *Art of Poetry*

*“One must listen to the claims of the document under analysis, and not assume fraud or error unless the author disqualified himself by contradictions or known factual inaccuracies.”*

Montgomery, John Warwick. *History and Christianity*, 1971

# Internal Evidence Test

- In other words, does the author tell the truth?
  - Hearsay evidence
  - Interested witness
  - Obtained by force or fraud or otherwise impeachable

# Internal Evidence Test

- How does the NT stack up to these criteria?
  1. Eyewitnesses (Matthew, John, Peter, Paul)
  2. Accounts of Jesus circulated within the lifetimes of those alive when Jesus was alive
    - Many who were bitter enemies of Jesus
    - Apostles even appealed to common knowledge

*“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know.”* Acts 2:22 (NIV)

*“The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.”*

Acts 26:26 (NIV)

# Internal Evidence Test

*“Despite the prejudices and theological preconceptions of the evangelists, they record many incidents that mere inventors **would have concealed** – the competition of the apostles for high places in the Kingdom, their flight after Jesus’ arrest, Peters’ denial, the failure of Christ to work miracles in Galilee, the references of some auditors to his possible insanity, his early uncertainty as to his mission, his confessions of ignorance as to the future, his moments of bitterness, his despairing cry on the cross; no one reading these scenes can doubt the reality of the figure behind them. ”*

Durant, Will. *Caesar and Christ*. Vol 3 in *The Story of Civilization*. 1944

# External Evidence Test

- Do other historical documents confirm or deny internal testimony of documents themselves?

**Eusebius** preserving the writings of **Papias** (A.D. 130) (a student of the apostle **John**)

*“The Elder [apostle John] used to say this also: Mark, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately all that he [Peter] mentioned, whether sayings or doings of Christ, not, however, in order. For he was neither a hearer nor a companion of the Lord; but afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who adapted his teachings as necessity required, not as though he were making a compilation of the sayings of the Lord. So then Mark made no mistake, writing down in this way some things as he mentioned them; for he paid attention to this one thing, not to omit anything that he had heard, not to include any false statement among them.”*

Eusebius, *The History of the Church*. 3. 39.

# External Evidence Test

- Do other historical documents confirm or deny internal testimony of documents themselves?
  - **Irenaeus**, Bishop of Lyons A.D. 180, was a student of **Polycarp** (who was also a disciple of **John**)

*“Matthew published his gospel among the Hebrews [i.e., Jews] in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure [i.e., death, which strong tradition places at the time of the Neronian persecution in 64], Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter’s preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his gospel, while he was living in Ephesus in Asia.”*

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*. 3.1.1.

# External Evidence Test

- Luke's detailed histories have consistently proven to be correct
  - Acts 11:27-30 "that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world."
    - Originally dismissed as fanciful, later confirmed through writings by Suetonius, Dion Cassius, Tacitus, Eusebius and Josephus
  - "...They *sailed under* [hyperleusamen] the lee of Cyprus, keeping northwards with a westerly wind on the beam" (Acts 27:4); "here they *ran before a wind under* [hypodramontes] the lee of Clauda" (Acts 27:14).
    - "...the most accurate account of sea-voyaging that has come down to us from antiquity. Experts in navel science agree that it is without a parallel" (as cited in Robertson, LH, p. 207).

Festus remarked *“The accusers brought no charges against him which I could **take cognizance.**”* The Greek word rendered by “take cognizance” or “understand” has a technical meaning. The Greek phrase in question, ***on ego hypenooun***, in its strongest sense means “**suspect**”. In a legal context, it does not mean that Festus literally could not understand the issues, but that the issue brought before him to adjudicate was a **religious issue, which fell outside the normal domain of the law**. Therefore, it fits naturally, given the unusual charges brought against Paul, for Festus, to request King Agrippa's help as an assessor (legal advisor), **a common practice of the day**, in order to draft the formal charges against Paul to send along with him to Rome.

Based upon his thorough studies of the legal accounts recorded in Acts: *“**The accounts of these trials in Acts is so technically correct that Roman historians since Mommsen have often judged them as the best illustration of Roman provincial jurisdiction in this particular period**”*.

# Who Would Die for a Lie?

- While many might die for a lie they believe was the truth, would any die for what they knew was a lie?
  - Apostles would know the truth

Peter – crucified	Andrew – crucified
Matthew – sword	John – natural
James (son of Alphaeus) - crucified	Philip – crucified
Simon – crucified	Thaddaeus – killed by arrows
James (brother of Jesus) – stoned	Thomas – spear thrust
Bartholomew – crucified	James (son of Zebedee) – sword

# Who Would Die for a Lie?

1. Apostles spoke and wrote as eyewitnesses
  - Luke 24:48; John 15:27; Acts 1:8; Acts 2:24,32; Acts 3:15; Acts 4:33; Acts 5:32; Acts 10:39; Acts 10:41; Acts 13:31; Acts 22:15; Acts 23:11; Acts 26:16, 1Cor 15:4-9; 1Cor 15:15; 1John 1:2
2. Apostles needed to be convinced of resurrection, but then...

### 3. ... they boldly proclaimed the resurrection

<sup>40</sup>... They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

<sup>41</sup>The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. <sup>42</sup> Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

Acts 5:40-42

- They didn't preach in obscure towns, rather Jerusalem and were steadfast to the end

*"At his own request he was crucified head downward, as unworthy to suffer like his Master."*

Workman, Herbert B. *The Martyrs of the Early Church*. 1913

*"Peter was crucified at Rome with his head downwards, as he himself had desired to suffer."*

Eusebius AD 325, *Church History II.1*, quoting Origen (AD 230) <sup>20</sup>

# What Good is a Dead Messiah?

- The life and teachings of Jesus were in conflict with the Jewish messianic speculation of the day
- Jews were taught that the Messiah would be a reigning, victorious, political leader. He would release Jews from bondage and restore Israel
- A suffering Messiah was a foreign concept
  - Isaiah 53 was overlooked

## Isaiah 53:4-5

*“<sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.*

*<sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.”*

# What Good is a Dead Messiah?

- Disciples believed that Jesus' pronouncements of his suffering and death were too gloomy and that his apprehensions were groundless.

*“<sup>31</sup>He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”*

Mark 8:31-32 (NIV)

# What Good is a Dead Messiah?

- Then came Calvary and all their hopes were gone

*“This is also why his disciples forsook him when he was taken captive. Their minds were so completely imbued with the idea of a conquering Messiah who role it was to subdue his enemies that when they saw him broken and bleeding under the scourging, a helpless prisoner in the hands of Pilate, and when they saw him led away, nailed to a cross to die as a common criminal, all their messianic hopes for Jesus were shattered.”*

George Eldon Ladd, Professor of New Testament, Fuller Theological Seminary

# But Something Happened...

- A few weeks after the crucifixion, contrary to their former doubting, the disciples were in Jerusalem proclaiming Jesus as Savior and Lord, the Messiah.
- The only reasonable explanation of the change is explained as:

*“ ... he appeared ... to the Twelve.”* 1 Cor 15:5 (NIV)

*“After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”*

Acts 1:3 (NIV)

# Summary

- Yes, many people have died for a good cause, but for the apostles, their good cause died on the cross
- Something happened that changed their minds and to this they testified, even with their willingness to die for this belief

# Appendix

## Oral Tradition Prior to the Written Gospels

# Review

- Textual, Historical, Source, Literary, Form and Redaction Criticism attempts to read past the words and understand original meaning
  - Unfortunately, when the result of this analysis contradicts what was written, the assumption is made that what was written was “made up”
    - Key flaw in theory is that it ignored the testimony of eyewitnesses who, if stories about them were “made up,” could refute the text. Implicit approval from eyewitnesses to stories circulating during their lifetimes is strong evidence of their accuracy.

# Time before the written Gospel...

- The Synoptic (Matthew, Mark, Luke) Gospels are so similar
  - Did one gospel writer copy another?
  - Did later writers put the final accounts together after changing the original accounts?
  - How can we have any confidence that these were accurate historical accounts?
    - For example, how do any of the writers even know what went on during Jesus' trials, for none of them were even there?

# What is a “Gospel”

- The word is foreign to the New Testament  
*“Our word, ‘gospel’ is a simplified form of the Old English ‘godspell,’ which meant ‘good story’ in the sense of ‘good news.’ The Old English word was designed to be the equivalent of the Latin evangelium, which in turn was derived from the Greek euangelion. In Greek the prefix eu means ‘well’ or ‘good,’ while the second part of the word is related to the verb angello, ‘report’ ‘bring a message,’ and to the noun angelos, ‘messenger’... The Greek compound euangelion thus appears in the New Testament in the sense of ‘good news’ or ‘good tidings.’”*
- What are some of the theories of the source of the gospels?

1. Widely dominant today is the 2-source theory, according to which Mark and a presumed document called 'Q' were the common sources of Matthew and Luke
2. Some contemporary scholars, however, reject this position and return to an older tradition which reserved a priority for Matthew
3. Others prefer to reconstruct a number of different sources behind the Gospels by separating a proto-Luke from Luke, a pre-Mark from Mark, or by dividing the so-called 'Q' document into various documents

- Each of these theories contradict each other and their advocates have not been able to convince the adherents of the other theories
- Why is it, after so many centuries we don't have a definitive answer as to how the Gospels were created?
  - Could it be we are trapped in a Literary Culture?

- What if we lived in an oral culture?
  - You have no documents which can refresh your memory as to actual events that occurred in the past or things that were said
  - How would you pass on these things accurately?
- Today we think, living in a literary culture that oral “story telling” gives liberties; rights to embellish to increase interest in “story”
  - But that would be taboo if your *only* method of transferring history were oral
    - The gospels were written during an oral culture.
    - While both circulated at the same time, oral cultures require a way of separating truth from fanciful stories

# The Formative Period

- The time between when the events detailed in the gospels occurred and when they were written down. The longer the period, the more time for errors to creep into the oral tradition.
  - 100+ years (German Tubingen School)
  - ~ 30 years (William F. Albright, Fuller Theological Seminary)
  - ~17 years (John A. T. Robinson – *Redating the New Testament*)
  - 7-10 years (Aramaic or Hebrew version of Matthew mentioned by Papias)

- How can you justify a formative period of less than 30 years?
  - Book of Acts finishes with events of A.D. 62
    - No mention of the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70)
    - No mention of Nero's persecution (A.D. 64)
    - No mention of the martyrdom of three central figures in Acts
      - James (A.D. 62)
      - Paul (A.D. 64)
      - Peter (A.D. 65)
    - Why aren't these mentioned when Acts does record the deaths of Stephen and James, the brother of John?

- If the book of Acts was *finished* no later than A.D. 62, then the book of Luke must have been *begun* much earlier than that since Luke mentions in the prologue of Acts that he had already finished that earlier book (Luke):

*“The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach.” (Acts 1:1 NASB)*

- Book of Luke possibly written in the late 50s or even earlier.

- Early church fathers affirm that Matthew wrote his account first. Some modern critics say Mark wrote his first. Either way, they both wrote it before Luke.
  - That means Matthew and Mark had to be earlier than whenever (50s?) that the book of Luke was written:

“...some, and perhaps all, of the gospels were written in substantially their present form within thirty years of the events, and that much of the material was already collected and written a decade or two before that. If that is the case, we are not dealing with a long folk-tradition, but with four parallel records of quite recent events, well within the lifetime of even a middle-aged witness of Jesus’ ministry”

France, R.T. *The Evidence for Jesus* 1986

And there was a reason to get these documents written as soon as possible

- The Early Church was Growing... and growing quickly. With new believers being added to the church daily, and in turn they spreading the word to others, there would have been a natural demand for accurate information about Jesus
- But not just anyone was entrusted to disseminate this information

# Replacement for Judas Iscariot

- One qualification accepted by the apostles was that the successor be an eyewitness:

*“It is therefore necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us – beginning with the baptism of John, until the day that He was taken up from us – one of these should become a witness with us of His resurrection”  
(Acts 1:21-22 NIV)*

- *“When one compares the synoptic gospels with one another, one finds that there is a greater word-for-word agreement in the **words of Jesus** than in the incidental details of the surrounding historical narrative. This is what one would expect if the material was handled as holy tradition.”*

Moreland, J.P. *Scaling the Secular City* 1987

- Special people were chosen, comparable to rabbis, to be responsible for preserving and passing along the “holy” tradition
  - This task consumed so much of their time that they were relieved of their other duties that they might devote full time *“to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”* (Acts 6:4 NASB)

# Palestine was Multi-Lingual

- Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek were all spoken of residents of the area
- During feasts, many more people from other nations would come to Jerusalem
- At the same time the church was growing by leaps and bounds, the message had to be translated into different languages.
  - Some languages don't have exact replacements
  - Just translating from Aramaic to Greek could account for some of the variances we see in the earliest texts

# Greek Speaking Communities

- While Jewish believers may have been content to stick with the oral tradition, the Greeks preferred a written report:

*“When, at Rome, Peter had openly preached the word and by the spirit had proclaimed the gospel, the large audience urged Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered what had been said, to write it all down. This he did, making his gospel available to all who wanted it.”*

Eusebius, *The History of the Church* writing about what Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155-220) reported

# Personal Information Included

*“And they pressed into service a passerby coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus)” (Mark 15:21 NASB)*

- There is no reason for Mark’s parenthetical reference to Alexander and Rufus, other than he expected his readers to have known who they were
  - Neither Matthew nor Luke, reporting the same event, mention them
  - Maybe their different readers would not have known them?
  - If this was written after the lifetime of witnesses of the events (as some say, 100s of years later), what would have been the purpose of adding these additional names?

# Luke's Gospel

- Includes interesting language that implies others had already written an account  
*“... if seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order...” (Luke 1:3b NASB)*
  - Luke's use of the word *kamoi* (“for me as well”) indicates Luke's awareness of others who created a written record.

# Apostle Paul

- Some would say his life represents the greatest evidence of the truth of the Christian faith. Even the liberal critics agree:

*“The sudden transformation of Paul from the most violent adversary of Christianity into its most determined herald... (was) nothing short of a miracle.”*

- One of the main reasons the evidence from Paul is so strong is that he produced his letters so early

Schaff, Philip, *History of the Christian Church* 1882 writing about the Dr. Baur, founder of the extremely liberal Tübingen School

<u>Book</u>	<u>Kümmel</u>	<u>Guthrie</u>	<u>Robinson</u>
1 Thessalonians	50	51	Early 50
2 Thessalonians	50-51	51	50-51
1 Corinthians	54-55	57	Spring 55
1 Timothy	100+	61-64	Autumn 55
2 Corinthians	55-56	57	Early 56
Galatians	54-55	49-50	Late 56
Romans	55-56	57-58	Early 57
Titus	100+	61-64	Late spring 57
Philippians	53-58	59-61	Spring 58
Philemon	56-60	59-61	Summer 58
Colossians	56-60	59-61	Late summer 58
Ephesians	80-100	59-61	Late summer 58
2 Timothy	100+	61-64	Autumn 58

- Obviously Kümmel (liberal German scholar) does not accept Pauline authorship of some of the NT books attributed to Paul.
- Regardless, each scholar agrees to within a few years

# 1 Cor 15:3-6

- “<sup>3</sup>For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup>and that he appeared to Peter,[ and then to the Twelve.] <sup>6</sup>After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.”

# But much of the content indicates earlier dating than A.D. 54-55

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance...” (1 Cor 15:3 NIV)

- “Received” and “passed on” are technical terms
  - Received (*Paralambanien*): “take over” Heb. *qibbel* denotes imprinting of a tradition or doctrine, while “passed on” (*paradidomi*) Heb. *masar* means to hand over to a pupil
  - What was passed on was, in the matter of content and form, a fixed body of material
    - Rigidly controlled transmission of material

# And while Paul was preaching to the Gentiles

- The phrases “the twelve”, “the third day”, “he was seen”, “for our sins [plural]” and “he was raised” are very Jewish and very early
- The poetic style is Hebraic
- The Aramaic *Cephas* is used; an early way of referring to Peter (“The Rock”)

So, if 1 Corinthians was written in A.D.  
54-55

- And Paul first visited Corinth in A.D. 50 and if that formalized statement predated his visit, then it could have been circulated prior to A.D. 50

*“Most scholars date it from three to eight years after Jesus’ death”*

Moreland, J.P. *Scaling the Secular City* 1987

# Summary

- The early Christians were Jews who understood the oral tradition of “losing not a drop”
- The time of this oral tradition could have been just a few years, scarcely enough time for myths and legends to creep in (not to mention the correcting factor of living eyewitnesses)
- Oral tradition rather than copying between writers is the best explanation for the extremely high agreement between the gospel writers for the words of Jesus, while having minor differences in the wording for the ancillary details