

THE HISTORICITY OF THE GOSPELS

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APOLOGETICS
FOR THE CHURCH

The Nature of Sources

1. Early evidence is strongly preferred above later contributions.
 - a. One example of early testimony about the resurrection, for example, is that Paul mentions a list of people who saw Jesus after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-8).
 - b. Many critical scholars (who do not profess Christ) believe this information came from an earlier source dating from the late 30s, less than ten years after Jesus resurrection.
2. Eyewitness testimony by those who actually participated in the events is highly regarded as reliable.

Factors That Increase Reliability

1. Multiple independent sources increase the historical reliability of an account.
 - a. Historian Paul L. Maier asserts, “Many facts from antiquity rest on just one ancient source, while two or three sources in agreement generally render the fact unimpeachable.”¹
 - b. We have as many early sources about Jesus’ life and teaching as we have about Tiberius, the emperor during Jesus’ ministry.²
 - i. The earliest writing about Tiberius comes from a contemporary, Velleius Paterculus, but his history is generally regarded as less valuable, because he wrote effusive flattery about Tiberius, probably because he was paid to do so.
 - ii. The other three sources available on Tiberius were written 80 or more years after Tiberius died, and the earliest copies we possess are 700 or more years later.
 - iii. In contrast, the Gospels were all written within 50 years of Jesus’ life, and the earliest manuscripts we possess of these writings date to within 100-200 years.
2. The principle of embarrassment, negative report, or surprise.
 - a. The reason is because if the Gospel was being fabricated as a propaganda piece, such stories would not be included as they would diminish the reputation of the person.
 - b. A common example is the somewhat negative portrayal of Peter in the Gospel of Mark.
 - c. Additional examples of this principle appear when Jesus’ own family thought he had lost his mind (Mark 3:21), or when his own brothers (including James, the pastor of the early Christian church in Jerusalem) didn’t believe his claims (John 7:5).
3. Enemy attestation
 - a. When an antagonistic source praises an enemy, acknowledges the virtue of an enemy, or confirms a historical event that is contrary to its best interests, the reliability of that person or event is strengthened.
 - i. For example, when Jesus performs miracles in front of the unbelieving religious leaders, they do not dispute the miracles, but rather attributed them to (Mark 3).
 - ii. In addition, the religious leaders do not deny the empty tomb, but instead pay the guards to report that the disciples stole the body (Matt. 28:11-15).
 - b. Outside the Gospels there are several sources which refer to Jesus and the Christian movement that followed his crucifixion.

¹ Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time* (Kregel, 1991), 197

² Peter Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels* (Crossway, 2018), 39-40.

- i. The Roman historian, Tacitus, referred to Christians as loathsome, and a disease, so he was no fan of the Christian church.
 - ii. Yet, he confirms that the Romans put Jesus (whom he calls Christus, the Latin form of the Hebrew word for Messiah) to death during the reign of Tiberius while Pontius Pilate was in charge of Judea.
4. Verifiable details³
- a. When a text mentions people, places, events, and cultural details unique to that time or place, it dispels the notion that the document was written far away geographically and later in history, as some charge the Gospels.
 - b. The geography test.
 - i. All of the Gospel writers demonstrate a familiarity with the details of Palestine, including obscure locations.
 - ii. Since no known first century sources mention many of these locations, it would be very hard to know about them unless one had lived there.
 - iii. Each of the Gospel writers mention dozens of geographical features, and Luke mentions as many as 99 features, including towns, regions, and bodies of water.
 - iv. The *Gospel of Thomas* only mentions one location, Judaea. The *Gospel of Philip* only mentions three places. The *Gospel of Judas* names no locations.
 - c. The names test.
 - i. In the first century Jews were scattered around the Roman Empire. In each location certain personal names were common, and the differences were fairly distinct.
 - ii. The significance of this test is that if the Gospels were written anywhere else but Palestine, the authors would have chosen names that would have been out of place.
 - d. The botanical test.
 - i. Many of the crops mentioned in the Bible were common to the Mediterranean, but the sycamore tree mentioned in Luke 19:4 was not.
 - ii. The tree Zacchaeus climbed in Jericho, the *ficus sycamorus*, did not grow in countries like Italy, Greece, and Turkey.
 - iii. According to a second-century rabbi, however, Jericho was known for its sycamore trees.
 - iv. There are no early sources that mention such details, and no way to know it otherwise.
 - e. The financial test.
 - i. Matthew and Mark write about a group of tax collectors in Capernaum.
 - ii. What is not mentioned in any Gospel is the fact that Capernaum was a border town between Herod Antipas' territory and Pontius Pilate's territory.
 - iii. It was a key location for collecting customs on goods entering Herod's territory.
 - iv. Jericho, where Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, was the key location on Pilate's side of the border.

Recommended Resources:

Blomberg, Craig L. *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016.

Gilbert, Greg. *Why Trust the Bible?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

Wallace, J. Warner. *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels*. Colorado Springs, CO:

David C Cook, 2013.

Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

³ Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels*, 54ff.