



## Recent Perspectives on the Reliability of the Gospels

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### Synopsis

The usual attempts to defend the historical reliability of the New Testament are often fairly general in nature. These arguments are typically based on the quantity, quality, and early date of the available New Testament manuscript copies, additional considerations that favor the traditional authorship of the books, plus extra-biblical confirmation, along with a few archaeological discoveries. This case for the trustworthiness of the New Testament is often contrasted with ancient, classical Greek and Roman writings, which do not exhibit the same wealth of data. However, much less-known among conservatives is one of several, more recent and specific paths that is usually applied by critical scholars to the Gospel texts. Proceeding in a more analytic manner, one of these methods applies certain critical criteria of authenticity to particular texts, namely, to events and sayings that are reported in the four Gospels. These contemporary techniques have mined many gems that indicate the historical richness of the Gospel accounts, while illuminating many aspects of Jesus' life. After a brief overview of some traditional paths, our chief purpose in this essay is to outline several of these criteria of authenticity as applied to the Gospels. Many examples will illustrate the application of these principles.

In Christian apologetic studies, the historical reliability of the New Testament has long been a mainstay. For decades, believers have used avenues such as manuscript evidence, authorship, extra-biblical sources, and archaeology to show both that the thousands

of existing copies accurately preserve the original texts, as well as correctly reporting what actually occurred. The purpose of these approaches, then, is primarily to argue that we have what the authors wrote and that these works are trustworthy historical accounts.<sup>1</sup> This has especially been important in studies of the Gospels, in order to indicate that the accounts of Jesus' teachings and actions are portrayed accurately.

More recently, critical scholars have continued to develop other tools that have uncovered hints that certain Gospel accounts provide additional grounds for recognizing them as historical reports. Even though most of the scholars who utilize these methods are not conservative, often they have provided means by which to ascertain the historicity of separate sayings or incidents in the life of Jesus.

In this article, we will initially provide some brief comments regarding the older, more familiar paths taken by scholars who have sought to show that the Gospel accounts are reliable. Then we will proceed to just one of the more recent avenues that uncovers some exciting new developments. This is the study of certain criteria that indicate when a specific text most likely includes a historical report.

### Traditional Paths

Older strategies that support the historical reliability of the New Testament often begin their case by pointing out that the New Testament documents enjoy superior manuscript evidence. Recent indications are that the New Testament is supported by more than 5500 copies and partial copies in Greek and other languages, while most ancient classical Greek and Roman texts have fewer than 10 each. Moreover, there is comparatively little significant variation between these manuscripts, even when they are derived from different textual families.

While this extraordinary quantity and quality of the available texts does not tell us if the New Testament writings are historically reliable, most scholars think that the far more manuscripts and portions do indicate that we essentially have what the authors originally wrote. This is obviously a crucial point to begin.

Further, the New Testament copies are much earlier — that is, closer to the original writings — than the classical texts. Most of the New Testament is available from copies that are only 100-150 years after its completion, while a copy of the entire New Testament dates from about another 100 years after that. In contrast, the classical counterparts generally date from 700-1400 years after their original compositions. This enormous difference significantly closes the distance between the authors and the earliest copies, placing the dates of the New Testament copies much closer to the events themselves. This makes it at least possible that the biblical writers were in a better position to know what actually occurred.<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, critical scholars readily admit these initial two points of manuscript number and date. John A. T. Robinson agrees that, “The wealth of manuscripts, and above all the narrow interval of time between the writing and the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best attested text of any ancient writing in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Even the skeptical Helmut Koester attests: “Classical authors are often represented by but one surviving manuscript.... But there are nearly five thousand manuscripts of the NT in Greek ... the manuscript tradition of the NT begins as early as the end of [the second century] CE.... Thus it seems that NT textual criticism possesses a base which is far more advantageous than that for the textual criticism of classical authors.”<sup>4</sup>

So we have excellent pointers that we have essentially what the various authors originally wrote. John Wenham thinks that the overall biblical text is 99.99 percent pure, without any of the differences affecting doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

Other areas of research take the next step by indicating that the texts also reliably report their contents. A strong move in this direction is supplied by arguments that favor the traditional authors as being either the original writers or the chief sources behind certain books. In recent years, that Paul was the author of at least the major works that bear his name is the best example of this authority.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, approximately one and a half dozen non-Christian, extra-biblical sources confirm many

details from Jesus’ life and teachings as found in the Gospels.<sup>7</sup> Early Christian writers like Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp provide even more confirmation, writing just ten years or less after the completion of the New Testament.<sup>8</sup> While archaeological sources do not contribute as much corroboration as they do in Old Testament studies, there are a number of indications that, when the details can be checked, the New Testament is often confirmed.<sup>9</sup>

Especially when taken together, much data are available which confirm the traditional picture regarding the life and teachings of Jesus. This is not to say that all pertinent questions have been solved.<sup>10</sup> But the available evidence from a variety of angles confirms the strong foundation on which the general reliability of the New Testament reports of the historical Jesus can be based.

## Recent Paths

Conservative scholars still generally gravitate to the more traditional paths to showing that the New Testament texts are reliable. Undoubtedly, many worthwhile insights emerge from data such as these. Textual attestation definitely brings us very close to the original wording. Authorship, source, and various kinds of historical confirmation all contribute much to the accuracy of the reports.

However, critical scholars tend to approach the subject from other angles. Though they recognize a number of the traditional insights, recent scholars are not as interested in the overall trustworthiness of the New Testament text. Their work is largely based on the twin assumptions that the various writings differ in value, and that, even within each composition, there is a mixture of worthwhile and questionable material. Avoiding arguments for the reliability of the whole, then, they concentrate on individual insights.

Still, among the strategies that critical scholars prefer, there are still many gems to be explored and mined. Though different, these treasures can add additional strength to the historical reliability of various New Testament portions. Some of these prizes are powerful tools that can add a more specific component to the general approach preferred by many conservatives. Of the angles that might be explored here, we will only be

able to pursue one avenue to the reliability of various Gospel reports<sup>11</sup> — that of the criteria of authenticity.

As we have said, recent critical scholars seldom address the question of Gospel reliability in a wholesale manner. The tendency is to apply various analytical principles to the text in order to ascertain individual passages that present the highest likelihood of providing legitimate insights, historical or otherwise. By implementing these standards, the approach tends to isolate portions, providing individual insights.

We should note here that the methods used by contemporary biblical scholars are actually borrowed from the approach to ancient texts regularly employed by secular historians. Seldom does one find a complete list of these principles, perhaps due in part to each scholar preferring some of them over others. I will attempt to provide a brief inventory of a number of these rules that are regularly applied to the Gospel material, along with examples of each.

Although not usually listed as part of the authenticity criteria per se, we will begin with two important principles that are well-recognized by scholars.

(1) Early evidence is strongly preferred above later contributions. Even the difference of a decade or two can be crucial. With regard to the historical Jesus, any material between 30 and 50 AD would be exemplary, a time period highly preferred by scholars like those in the Jesus Seminar.<sup>12</sup>

Reports from such an early date would actually predate the written Gospels. A famous example is the list of Jesus' resurrection appearances supplied by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. Most critical scholars think that Paul's reception of at least the material on which this early creedal statement is based is dated to the 30s AD.<sup>13</sup> Other examples are supplied by the brief creedal statements that many scholars find embedded within the Book of Acts, which Gerald O'Collins dates to the 30s AD.<sup>14</sup> From the so-called "Q" material in the first and third Gospels, another instance is the statement of high Christology found in Matthew 11:27/Luke 10:22.<sup>15</sup> Further, Paul's earliest epistles date from the 50s AD.

(2) Whenever these early sources are also derived from eyewitnesses who actually participated in some of the events, this provides one of the strongest evidences possible. Historian David Hackett Fischer dubs this "the rule of immediacy" and terms it "the best relevant evidence."<sup>16</sup> When scholars have ancient sources that are both very early and based on eyewitness testimony, they have a combination that is very difficult to dismiss.

In our previous example, one reason critical scholars take Paul's testimony so seriously is that his writings provide both a very early date as well as eyewitness testimony to what Paul believed was a resurrection appearance of Jesus. This is even conceded by atheist scholar Michael Martin.<sup>17</sup> Other crucial instances would concern any eyewitness testimony that can be located in the Gospel accounts.

(3) Independent attestation of a report by more than one source<sup>18</sup> is another chief indication that that a particular claim may be factual. Ancient historian Paul Maier asserts that: "Many facts from antiquity rest on just one ancient source, while two or three sources in agreement generally render the fact unimpeachable."<sup>19</sup> The Jesus Seminar emphasizes items "attested in two or more independent sources."<sup>20</sup>

Several important examples might be provided. Of the five sources often recognized in the Gospel accounts,<sup>21</sup> Jesus' miracles are reported in all five, with some specific occurrences reported in more than one.<sup>22</sup> Jesus' crucial "Son of Man" sayings are also attested in all five Gospel sources.<sup>23</sup> And the empty tomb is reported in at least three, if not four, of these Gospel sources.<sup>24</sup> This helps to understand why these items are taken so seriously by contemporary critical scholars.

(4) A rather skeptical criterion of authenticity is termed dissimilarity or discontinuity. Although it is frequently criticized, it continues to be a very popular tool for determining the historicity of some of Jesus' teachings. Here it is thought that a particular saying can be attributed to someone only if it cannot be plausibly accounted for as the words or teaching of other contemporary sources. For Jesus, it must be determined if one of the Gospel teachings can be attributed to either Jewish thought or to the exhortations of the early church. Historian Michael Grant calls this the

“principal valid method of research.”<sup>25</sup>

We have already mentioned that Jesus’ “Son of Man” sayings are multiply attested. It can also be shown that, by the principle of dissimilarity, they are unaccounted for by either Jewish or early Christian teachings. At least some Jews did have a “Son of Man” concept (as indicated by texts like 1 Enoch 46:2; 48:2-5, 10; 52:4; 62:5-9; 69:28-29 and 4 Ezra 13:3ff.), but, of course, it was not applied to Jesus. And even though “Son of Man” is Jesus’ favorite self-designation in the Gospels, very surprisingly, none of the New Testament epistles attribute this title to Jesus even a single time. So the conclusion is that, in all likelihood, Jesus must have used this designation for himself.<sup>26</sup>

(5) Another criterion applied to Gospel studies is the presence of Aramaic words, substrata, environment, or other indications of a Palestinian origin. Perhaps when these conditions appear in the Gospels, we are looking through a window into the actual teachings of Jesus.

One major study of an Aramaic term is provided by Joachim Jeremias’ well-known and influential research on whether Jesus utilized the word “abba” as a reference to God (Mk. 14:36).<sup>27</sup> While Jeremias’ conclusions have been qualified, it remains the case that we have an instance here where Jesus probably employed a very unusual term that was very rarely ever applied to God in Jewish usage.<sup>28</sup> As such, this word as used by Jesus is best understood as a familiar, personal, and even intimate reference for his Father.

(6) Coherence is a more general criterion. If a purported event or teaching fits well with what is already known concerning other surrounding occurrences and teachings of Jesus, it may be said to have a basis in history.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the proposed event or saying even does more, by illuminating other known incidents, rendering them more intelligible.

For [John] Meier, coherence is one of the best indicators of Jesus’ teachings. For example, Jesus’ teaching in Mark 12:18-27 concerning the resurrection of the dead coheres well with a “Q” saying of Jesus on the same subject of the afterlife (reported in Matthew 8:11-12/Luke 13:28-29), as

well as other teachings of Jesus.<sup>30</sup> Meier concludes that another instance is the Gospel teaching that Jesus’ family had rejected him, which coheres well with Jesus’ repeated teaching that believers will be called to leave their own families for the sake of himself and his Kingdom (such a Mark 10:29-31).<sup>31</sup>

Besides these major criteria, other details from Jesus’ life are enhanced by additional considerations.

(7) The principle of embarrassment, negative report, or surprise is indicated by the presence of disparaging remarks made by the author about him/herself, another individual, or event concerning which the author is *friendly* and has a vested interest.<sup>32</sup> The point is that, in normal circumstances, most people need a sufficient reason to report very negative things about something which they deem valuable, or someone they love dearly. This would appear to be the case especially where the purpose of the writing was to instruct the readers in holy living.

Many examples of the principle of embarrassment can be found in the Gospels. The strong unbelief of James, Jesus’ own brother, prior to the crucifixion (Mark 3:20-25; John 7:5) begs an adequate cause for exposing this report about this apostle and pious leader in the early church. This is why the majority of recent critical scholars believes that these are authentic reports.<sup>33</sup> Another example is Jesus’ saying in Mark 13:32, where in the very same context where he indicates that he is the Son of the Father, he also declares that he does not know the time of his coming. But why would not the Son of God know something about the future?<sup>34</sup>

That all four Gospels report that women were the first ones to discover the empty tomb is also quite embarrassing. That it was uncustomary for women even to testify in a law court, especially when it came to crucial matters, indicates that the early church would not have desired to make them their chief witnesses unless they actually were.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, the repeated unbelief and other negative reactions reported about the disciples, both when Jesus told them about his impending resurrection before it occurred (Mark 8:31-33; 9:31-32; 10:32-34; 14:27-31), as well as after Jesus had risen from

the dead (Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:36-38; John 20:19, 24-25), are further indications, again, that they really did react this way. Otherwise, why else would the disciples, the leaders of the early church, be placed in such a negative light?<sup>36</sup>

(8) The criterion of enemy attestation is satisfied when an antagonistic source expresses agreement regarding a person or event when it is *contrary* to their best interests to do so. Maier holds that “such positive evidence within a hostile source is the strongest kind of evidence ... if Cicero, who despised Catiline, admitted that the fellow had one good quality — courage — among a host of bad ones then the historian correctly concludes that Catiline was at least courageous.”<sup>37</sup>

In the case of Jesus’ miracles, an example of enemy attestation is provided by the repeated Gospel testimony that those who opposed Jesus either witnessed these acts and failed to challenge them (Mark 3:1-6), or attributed them to Satan (Mark 3:22-27), thus acknowledging these events. Marcus Borg points out that this is one of the reasons that makes it “virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist.”<sup>38</sup> In another instance, the Jewish priests are said to have paid the guards at Jesus’ tomb in order to have them report that the disciples stole Jesus’ body (Matthew 28:11-15), thereby agreeing that Jesus’ tomb had been discovered empty.

Critical criteria such as these are very helpful in establishing especially the historicity of separate Gospel accounts. Viewing the texts from various angles helps indicate that many of Jesus’ stories and sayings are historically grounded.

### The Minimal Facts Method

A last consideration concerns the overall methodology employed when arguing for the reliability of the New Testament. Certainly one of the strongest indications of historicity occurs when a saying or event can be constructed from data that are admittedly well-established even across a wide range of otherwise diverse historical opinions. Historian Christopher Blake speaks of such scholarly agreement as the “very considerable part of history which is acceptable to the community of professional historians.”<sup>39</sup>

Along these lines, I have proposed frequently what I have termed the “minimal facts” historical method, in which I employ only those data that satisfy at least two major standards. Each event or saying must be (1) exceptionally well-attested on multiple grounds, which might be indicated, for example, by authenticity criteria such as those which we have listed here. Further, (2) the event or saying must be recognized as historical by the vast majority of scholars who treat this subject, especially when they oppose the conclusion that they think is nonetheless warranted.

Of these two standards, the initial one is clearly the most significant. Strong confirmation of events and sayings, each for multiple reasons, places the emphasis directly on the factual claims themselves. While the second standard, recognition by a strong majority of critical scholars, is still very helpful, this can change more readily over time, sometimes without reference to the data itself. As a chief method of investigation, this approach allows one’s best historical data to be showcased in order to make the strongest case available.<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

While traditional paths still generate several strong reasons for the overall reliability of the New Testament, critically-applied rules of authenticity have more specific applications within the Gospel accounts. The latter are often the decisive tests presently employed in the study of the historical Jesus.

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### Endnotes

1. For the purposes of this essay, we are not differentiating between the terms “reliability” and “trustworthiness.”
2. For many details, see F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 16-18; Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), especially Chapter 3.
3. John A.T. Robinson, *Can we Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 36.
4. Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, two vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), II:16-17.

5. John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 186-187.

6. Numerous details and perspectives on Paul's writings are found in Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998). Further relevant discussion regarding authorship is found in Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable? A Look at the Historical Evidence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), especially chapters 5-8, 11-12.

7. For details, see Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), Chapter 9; F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

8. See J.B. Lightfoot, editor and translator, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1891, 1956). Cf. Habermas, Chapter 10.

9. Details are provided by R.T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, The Jesus Library, edited by Michael Green (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), Chapter 4; Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, Chapter 8.

10. For a general consideration of many important issues, see Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987).

11. For a brief listing of these criteria, plus an outline of several other critical approaches, see Gary R. Habermas, "Why I Believe the New Testament is Historically Reliable," in *Why I am a Christian: Leading Thinkers Explain Why they Believe*, edited by Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), Chapter 9.

12. This is the first of "The Rules of Oral Evidence," as emphasized by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 25-26.

13. Walter Kasper even argues that this material may have been in use in 30 AD! (Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, translated from the German by V. Green [Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1974], 125.); cf. Funk and Hoover, 24, 128.

14. Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 109.

15. The Jesus Seminar dates the "Q" tradition to the 50s AD (Funk and Hoover, 18, 128).

16. David Hackett Fischer, *Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York:

Harper and Row, 1970), 62. Fischer includes the archaeological "remains" of an occurrence and treats these as more primary than "direct observations." For eyewitness reporting in ancient Greek writing, see Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 38-39. For some concerns by one of the only ancient historians to address meta-historical issues, see Lucian of Samosata, *How to Write History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), especially 7-15.

17. Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 81.

18. Some scholars have also proposed multiple attestation of literary forms or patterns.

19. Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 197.

20. Funk and Hoover, 26.

21. These are Mark, the material found in Matthew alone (M), the material found in Luke alone (L), the "Q" sayings, and John.

22. Marcus Borg acknowledges that the Gospel attestation of Jesus' miracles is "widespread" (Jesus, *A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987], 61). See also the almost 500 pages of indepth study on this topic by John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 967-970 for his conclusions, including the multiple attestation of Jesus' miracles.

23. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 102.

24. Habermas, *Ibid.*, 23.

25. Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1977; Collier Books Edition, 1992), 202.

26. Meier spends considerable time on another example of discontinuity between the distinctives of Jesus' message and those of the Dead Sea community. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 3: *Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 489-532, 633-636.

27. Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 9-30; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, second revised edition, translated by S.H. Hooke (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972),

100-114.

28. Even Norman Perrin, in *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967, 37-41), views this term as one a Jewish child might use of his father, and thinks that Jesus used it to refer to God. Perrin also thinks it fulfills the criterion of dissimilarity.

29. Cf. W.B. Gallie, "Explanations in History and the Genetic Sciences," in Patrick Gardiner, editor, *Theories of History: Readings from Classical and Contemporary Sources* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 397-398; the idea in critical New Testament research is pursued in Perrin, *Ibid.*, 43-45.

30. Meier, *Companions and Competitors*, especially 437-444.

31. Meier, *Ibid.*, 69, 72.

32. Grant, *Ibid.*, 202-203; cf. Funk and Hoover, 23.

33. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 21-22 provides some of the documentation.

34. Guthrie speaks for many when he states that this comment is simply too embarrassing to have been invented, so its authenticity should not be questioned. See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981), 794, note 14.

35. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 23-24.

36. For a single example of the many relevant comments here, see Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 60.

37. Maier, 198-199.

38. Borg, 61.

39. Christopher Blake, "Can History be Objective?" in Gardiner, 331.

40. For an example of applying the minimal facts approach, I have utilized this twofold methodology in my publications on Jesus' resurrection. For examples, see *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, Chapter 1, especially 8-10, 26-31, and *The Historical Jesus*, 158-167. For an application to the Deity of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God, and salvation, see *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, Chapters 3-6. On how this approach might be applied to the doctrine of inspiration, see Gary R. Habermas, "Jesus and the Inspiration of Scripture," *Areopagus Journal*, Vol 2 (2002), especially 14-15.

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