

The Gospels as History

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At one time or another, all of us have seen those shows on the History Channel or someplace similar about “the search for the historical Jesus”. Typically, these searches are conducted by an earnest narrator with a British accent who alternately tours ruins in Palestine and interviews wise-looking Biblical studies professors in their book-lined offices. Almost always, these scholars will tell us with great certainty that modern research has proven that the gospels cannot be true. Instead of being accounts of the actual life of Jesus, the stories of the gospels were generated by the oral traditions of early churches, which basically made up stories about Jesus to fill whatever spiritual needs they had at the time.

Every time I watch one of those shows, the question pops into my head, “How can they possibly know that?” It’s not like we have bales of writings from early churches in which people confess to making up stories about Jesus. Instead, these scholars claim to find the evidence of this fabrication in the gospels themselves. That doesn’t make any sense to me either. I don’t consider myself an idiot, I’ve had a fair amount of training in how to read and understand texts, and yet, I’ve never seen anything in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John that would point to such a conclusion.

These scholars arrive at their conclusions anyway because they come at the Scripture from a very different perspective. They refuse to accept any statement in the gospels as true unless they have some other piece of evidence that backs it up. In other words, they assume that the gospel authors are misrepresenting what Jesus did unless there’s a specific reason to believe that they’re telling the truth. They read the Bible with a guilty-until-proven-innocent mindset.

What do we see, though, if we consider the gospels on their own merits, if we don’t automatically assume that the writers are lying, if we treat them as we would any other historical document? When we apply this standard to the gospels, a different result emerges. We see instead how accurate they are. Let’s look, then, at the gospels as history.

Eyewitness Testimony

Before I go any further, there are two points that I need to make. First, in about half of this material, I’m following the arguments made by Richard Bauckham in his book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. It’s a scholarly and thoughtful look at these issues, and although I don’t agree with a number of his claims, much of what he says is valuable.

Second, I don’t mean to undermine in any way the idea that the Scriptures are inspired. I believe that every word in the Bible is the product of the will of God, but I also believe that, rather than filling their minds with everything He wanted them to record, God guided the authors of the Bible to investigate the truth about Jesus for themselves. Because of this, it is possible for us to use our reason as well as our faith in considering the Scriptural record.

First, we must note that the early church prized **EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY**. This is well captured by the church father **PAPIAS**. In the early part of the second century, he describes his efforts as a young man to learn about Jesus from those who actually knew Jesus. He writes, “For unlike most people I did not enjoy those who have a great deal to say, but those who teach the truth. Nor did I enjoy those who recall someone else’s commandments, but those who remember the commandments given by the Lord . . . For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.” In the time of which Papias was writing, the late first century, some original disciples of Jesus were still alive, and Papias considered them the best witnesses to Jesus.

This same preference for firsthand, eyewitness testimony is evident throughout the gospels. We see this most simply from **JOHN** in John 21:24. The point here is plain. Either the author is John, and this is true, or he isn’t John, and he is lying. However, if the author is simply pretending to be John to lend credence to his work, he picked a very strange way to go about it. After all, nowhere in the gospel does the author identify himself as John. We have to reach that conclusion ourselves by comparing the gospel of John to the Synoptic Gospels and realizing that John the son of Zebedee, so prominent in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is never named in John. That makes sense as a mark of the modesty of the genuine apostle, but it makes no sense coming from a brash impostor. After all, if the impostor is using his false claim to be John as the source of his authority, he’s going to plaster that claim all over the gospel. John is genuine.

LUKE, though not an apostle, is equally clear concerning his reliance on eyewitnesses. Let’s look at Luke 1:2-3. Luke didn’t rely on some vague oral tradition in his research. Instead, he went to the source. He learned the traditions about Jesus from those who had actually been with Jesus from the beginning, and then he committed those traditions to writing. We gain even more insight about Luke’s sources when we look at the words of Peter in Acts 1:21-22. When Peter and the others were selecting a replacement for Judas Iscariot, it wasn’t enough for the apostle candidates to be disciples. Instead, they had to be men who had been with Jesus throughout His entire ministry and had seen the risen Lord, because only then were they equipped to be His witnesses. In other words, when Luke records the words of men who were present from the beginning, he was recording either apostles or men qualified to be apostles. Other than Jesus Himself, there could have been no better witnesses to the life of Jesus than the witnesses Luke used.

This preoccupation with witnesses who saw the whole story, beginning to end, is also evident in the words of Jesus in John 15:27. Both the writers of the Synoptic Gospels and John believed that it was important. This is significant because it gives us a crucial clue to the main source of the gospel of **MARK**. If early Christians believed that the best witnesses were the ones who were present from the beginning to the end, then we would expect early Christian writers to take pains to locate their primary sources at the beginning and end of the gospels they were writing. For example, look at Mark 1:16. Here, we see that other than Jesus and John the Baptist, the very first person that Mark mentions is Peter.

When we look at the end of Mark, we find Peter there too, in Mark 16:7. On its face, it doesn't make sense for Mark to mention Peter in this context. After all, Peter was certainly part of the group of the disciples. However, if Mark's goal is to remind us that Peter was part of the group of disciples who saw the risen Lord, and therefore was a reliable witness from beginning to end, that makes a whole lot of sense. Mark is establishing the credentials of the man he used as his primary witness. This fits with what else we know from Scripture. When Peter was rescued from prison in Acts 12, he went immediately to the house of Mark's mother. Likewise, in 1 Peter 5, Peter describes Mark as his son. Similarly, Papias and the other church fathers also regarded Peter as the primary source for Mark. When we put all of these things together, we see that the gospel of Mark is based on the words of a man who knew Jesus better than just about anybody.

Even beyond this, the gospels contain evidence that the gospel writers used the testimony of **MINOR EYEWITNESSES** too. Most of the time, the minor characters in the gospels, like temple guards and lepers whom Jesus healed, are not named. Often, the reasons why characters are chosen to be named are not immediately obvious. Look, for instance, at Luke 24:13, 18. This is the story of Jesus' encounter with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. One of the disciples, Cleopas, is named, but the other remains anonymous. The most credible explanation for this discrepancy is that Cleopas is named because he was the one who told Luke the story. Just like we cite sources in a research paper, Luke cites Cleopas as his eyewitness, and implicitly invites skeptics to go ask Cleopas for themselves.

This also supplies us with the reason why names drop out of the later gospels. Most scholars agree that Matthew and Luke are later than Mark. Not coincidentally, when Matthew and Luke are telling the same story as Mark, they will often omit names that Mark includes. For instance, compare Mark 10:46 with Luke 18:35. Both of these passages are about the same event—the healing of a blind man on the road to Jericho. However, Mark supplies the man's name—Bartimaeus—and Luke does not. The reason why Mark included Bartimaeus's name is most likely the same reason that Luke included Cleopas's name—because Mark based his account of the incident on the testimony of Bartimaeus and wanted his readers to know that they could go to Bartimaeus for confirmation. By the time Luke writes his gospel, probably using the gospel of Mark as one of his sources, Bartimaeus is dead and there's no reason to mention his name.

Tradition

All of this makes clear that the gospel accounts are based on the testimony of eyewitnesses, recorded perhaps 30 to 50 years after those eyewitnesses interacted with Jesus. That's a lot of time for **TRADITIONS** to get mixed up. However, the Scripture gives us assurance that the first-century church **TOOK GREAT CARE** with them. Look, for example, at 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. Remember, all of this is set in the time period between the death of Jesus and the appearance of the written gospels. Because the gospels weren't set down yet, the only way for Christians to learn about Jesus was to ask someone who knew. Paul says that that's what he did. He received teaching about Jesus, most likely from Peter and other members of the Jerusalem church, and he delivered that same teaching to the Christians in Corinth. This teaching was no small matter. Instead, it was of first importance, and we can safely assume that Paul and the other Christians handled it in the same way we handle things of first importance: carefully, with attention to preserving them.

As if this care weren't enough, the traditions also invited first-century believers to **AUTHENTICATE** them. This is apparent in 1 Corinthians 15:5-7. As the gospel writers did, Paul is including a list of eyewitnesses so that his hearers could, if they so chose, get the information straight from the source. They could ask Peter, or any of the rest of the Twelve, or James the brother of the Lord, or any of the other apostles, or, for that matter, most of the other 500 witnesses to the resurrection. Notice that Paul makes a special point of saying that most of these 500 are still alive. Their continued existence as witnesses ensured that the traditions about the resurrection would not become corrupt.

Furthermore, it is **NOT TRUE** that early Christians made up traditions about Jesus to suit the needs of the moment. In fact, the evidence points to the contrary conclusion. Look at the care that Paul shows for his sources in 1 Corinthians 7:10, 12. If Paul had been unconcerned with preserving the teaching of the real, historical Jesus, it would have been easy for him to attribute the entire content of 1 Corinthians 7 to Jesus and have done. However, that's not what he did. Instead, he carefully distinguished between the original words of the Lord and His own additional teaching.

We see this same care in the distance that the authors of the gospels are careful to keep between the ministry of Jesus and their own time. Look, for instance, at Mark 9:31-32. Clearly, Peter understood Jesus' words when Mark was being written, but he and the Twelve didn't understand them when Jesus first spoke them, and Peter's goal is to preserve the memory of that time as faithfully as possible. The effect of these efforts was to make the gospels good history.

Not Done in a Corner

Now that we've gotten all of that under control, let's look at one of the more subtle implications of the fact that the gospels are good history. There are many different kinds of stories recorded in Scripture, but every one of them has its purpose. Sometimes, the purpose is immediately obvious; sometimes, it is not. For an example of the latter, look with me at Matthew 28:11-15. At first glance, this is just another depressing proof of the hardheartedness of the Jewish leadership. Here, we see two guards who were actual witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. They come to the chief priests and tell them what they have seen. However, the chief priests bribe the guards to claim instead that some disciples of Jesus stole His body from the tomb while they were sleeping. Apparently, that story was then widely spread about.

This is interesting to us for several different reasons. First of all, it establishes that the tomb was empty. Everybody, from Jesus' followers to His worst enemies, agreed that His body didn't stay where it was put. Second, it shows the damage control style of the Jewish leadership. They were not interested in unbiased proclamation of the truth. There were only two witnesses to the actual moment of resurrection—the two guards. Because of that limited number of witnesses, the chief priests could plausibly make up another explanation of events, and that's exactly what they did.

Third, this alternate version of events—that the disciples stole the body of Jesus—was so widely known that Matthew felt compelled to spend one of the last sections of his narrative refuting it. It's not like the Jewish leadership made this story up and then forgot about it. Instead, it appears likely that they aggressively promoted it for decades.

Fourth, and most importantly, this section of Matthew 28 is the only section like it in the New Testament. It's the only time that a gospel historian thinks it's necessary to counter the official version of events, and the fact that this is an exception is extremely significant. After all, we've already seen that the Jewish officials were hostile to the gospel and not at all shy about making up, if necessary, an account of events that supported their point of view. Why, then, don't we see the New Testament writers repeatedly addressing all kinds of anti-gospel propaganda?

The apostle Paul gives us a marvelous explanation for this phenomenon in Acts 26:25-26. The actual resurrection of Jesus was an event only experienced by a couple of people. In that, it was by far the exception. The ministry and miracles of Jesus and His apostles weren't some kind of private work. They didn't go off in secret with the most fervent adherents of Christ, and then come back out and announce to the public that another noteworthy miracle had occurred.

Instead, from the beginning of Jesus' ministry to the end of the book of Acts, the supernatural proofs of Jesus' authenticity primarily occurred in public. They took place not just in front of His disciples, in the presence of those who could be expected to concoct a miracle even if none had occurred. Instead, those miracles happened in the plain sight of the enemies and opponents of Jesus, many of whom were very shrewd and resourceful men. If there had been the slightest hint of collusion or fraud, those men would have noticed and told the world about it to defeat the gospel they hated, just like the so-called miracle workers of our day attract all kinds of negative attention and negative narratives. The gospel writers would have had to spend a lot of ink in rebuttal. And yet, that is precisely what we do not see.

Why not? Why didn't these adversarial witnesses to Jesus and His apostles expose the miracles of their Nazarene foe? The only logical answer is that they didn't because they couldn't. The miracles that accompanied the gospel were so public and so spectacular that they left the enemies of the gospel with no opportunity to refute them. Their very silence is one of the great pillars of our faith today. Let's consider this morning the works that were not done in a corner.

Jesus.

One of the most prominent examples of this public ministry was Jesus Himself. The Scripture is clear that Jesus did spectacular things and did them prominently. Look, for example, at Matthew 4:23-24. This is the story of a man who caused a national sensation. Jesus didn't fill His audience with people pretending to be sick and then "heal" them. He didn't perform miracles where the cure was not immediately evident. Instead, He healed every kind of sickness, every kind of disease, in everyone who came to Him. Epilepsy? Jesus healed it. Leprosy? Jesus healed it. Demonic possession? Jesus healed it. Even at this stage, Jesus had His enemies. Many Pharisees saw His works and claimed, for instance, that He cast out demons with the help of Beelzebul prince of demons. However, never in Scripture do we see a single Pharisee or scribe attempt to deny that Jesus was working miracles at all. His healings were so numerous and so obvious that they denied His opponents that rhetorical ploy. Jesus worked miracles, and the record could not be clearer.

Likewise, the record could not be clearer that Jesus died. We have this from the pen of one of the eyewitnesses, the apostle John. Let's consider together John 19:33-35. The Romans knew their business as executioners. They weren't about to let Jesus or any of the other condemned men off of their crosses until they knew those men were 100 percent dead, so they performed a test on Jesus to make sure He was dead. This reminds me of a soap opera episode I saw a number of years ago, in which they thought that one of the characters was only pretending to be in a coma. They took a needle and poked it into his toes to see if he would react. What we see in John 19 is the brutal Roman equivalent of the needle test. They took a spear and thrust it into His side so deeply that water and blood flowed out. This wasn't some little toy spear, either. Later on, Jesus invited Thomas to put his entire hand into the gaping hole left by the spear. It's

likely that if Jesus hadn't been dead when the Romans speared Him, the spear would probably have done the trick. And yet, when Jesus was subjected to this savage spear thrust, He didn't even twitch. He didn't twitch because He was dead, and that fact would have been perfectly obvious to John, the Romans, and any of the other bystanders. The Scriptural narrative leaves no room for the idea that Jesus just passed out on the cross and woke up in the tomb. Instead, it points to the unassailable fact that Jesus was dead, and that His death would have been a matter of public knowledge.

We see much the same thing when we consider the resurrection of Jesus. Paul describes the primary witnesses to the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3-6. It's not like Jesus just presented Himself to the apostles and His very closest associates. Instead, in the 40 days following Jesus' resurrection, more than 500 people saw the Lord, and at the time Paul was writing 1 Corinthians, most of the 500 were still alive. You could go up to them and ask them, and they would tell you that they saw Jesus, alive and perfectly whole, after He had died. Admittedly, this is a bit different than Jesus' miracles. To our knowledge, none of Jesus' enemies saw Him after His resurrection. However, this is still extremely strong evidence for the fact of that resurrection. It's impossible that these 500 disciples could have conspired together to claim that Jesus was still alive when He was actually dead. Just as a matter of human nature, every conspiracy of that size has at least one person who is going to rat out his co-conspirators, yet there's no evidence inside the Scripture or outside of it that any of the witnesses to the resurrection ever recanted. Some of those men and women were tortured and killed for the claim they made, but they never withdrew it. Nor could this have been a hoax. After all, the closest followers of Jesus would have been numbered among the 500. They had followed Him for years, and they would have been able to spot an impostor just like we would notice an imposture of someone close to us. Like Thomas, they would have demanded proof, up close and personal. That's why John speaks not just of what his community of believers saw, but of what they touched with their hands. Those 500 people knew for a fact that Jesus had been raised.

The Apostles.

When the apostles took up the gospel after Jesus' ascension, they too maintained this standard of public, incontestable miracle. Look at how public the apostles' speaking in tongues was in Acts 2:5-6. This is not some pre-selected group of stooges. Instead, the audience to this miracle was composed of devout Jews from all across the Roman Empire and even beyond. Most of them had come to Jerusalem only for the festival of the Passover. They didn't hear the apostles speaking some kind of gobbledygook like what is often called "speaking in tongues" today. Instead, they heard them speaking the languages they spoke back home, sometimes thousands of miles from Jerusalem. To top it all off, they recognized that the men who were speaking weren't linguistic experts. Instead, they were Galileans, which had the reputation then that Arkansas does today. The apostles looked and dressed in a way that would have led others to regard them as backwoods hicks, and yet, here they were, speaking every tongue known to the inhabited world. Is it any wonder that the crowd was bewildered? What they were hearing could only be explained by the supernatural.

We see the same thing concerning the healings of the apostles in Acts 3:9-10. Here, the apostles have just healed a lame man who had been lame since birth, for more than 40 years. In that time, he had supported himself by begging for alms at the gate of the temple. As a result, every Jew who visited the temple saw this man and knew that he was lame. Now, Peter and John have come to the temple at the hour of prayer, when the gate is thronged with worshipers, and healed this indisputably lame man. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, were present to see the first steps this man ever took. There was no opportunity for trickery, no chance for fraud. When the Sanhedrin meets, looking to discredit the apostles, all they can say is, "It is evident to all that a noteworthy miracle has occurred, and we cannot deny it."

Paul.

This same undeniable power is also evident in the life of Paul. Look, for instance, at what the Scripture says about his conversion in Acts 9:19-21. Here, we have a man whom everyone knows was Persecutor of the Church Number One. He lived a life of power and privilege. Now, all of a sudden, he throws all of that away to preach the very gospel that he used to persecute. Why? I don't think he enjoyed the stonings and death threats and midnight escapes. It's not like a man that firmly set in his ways could be persuaded out of them by mere human argument. Instead, the only plausible explanation is the one Paul gives—that Jesus miraculously appeared to him and convinced him he was wrong.

In addition, the miracles that Paul worked were just as spectacular and just as public. We see one instance of this in Acts 19:11-12, 17. Once again, we have a situation where numerous miracles are taking place. Paul is healing everyone who comes to him, and even pieces of clothing that he wore contained his healing power. Nor is he working in some hotbed of Christianity, filled with people who are predisposed to believe. Instead, this is the stronghold of the worship of the pagan goddess Artemis, with citizens who may never have heard of the God of Israel before. Nonetheless, because of Paul's works, the fear of the Lord falls on this whole province of pagans, and they magnify the name of Jesus.