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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 manuscripts; the traditional authorship of the books; extrabiblical confirmation; and a few archaeological discoveries. This evidence 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.

Lesser known among conservative scholars, however, are several, more recent and specific approaches that critical scholars apply to the Gospel texts. One of these approaches involves applying 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.

The historical reliability of the New Testament has long been a mainstay in Christian apologetics. For decades, believers have used avenues such as manuscript evidence, authorship, extrabiblical sources, and archaeology to show that the thousands of existing copies of the New Testament accurately preserve the original texts, as well as correctly report what actually occurred. The purpose of these approaches is primarily to argue that we have essentially what the biblical authors wrote and that these works are trustworthy historical accounts.¹ This has been especially important in demonstrating that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' teachings and actions are accurate.

In recent years, however, critical scholars² have developed other tools that have uncovered additional grounds for recognizing certain Gospel accounts as historical reports. Most of the scholars who utilize these methods are not theologically conservative; nevertheless, often they have provided means by which to ascertain the historicity of separate sayings or incidents in the life of Jesus.

In this article, I 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. I will then explain just one of the more recent avenues that uncovers some exciting new developments, namely, 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 by pointing out that the New Testament documents enjoy superior manuscript evidence. Indications are that the New Testament is supported by more than 5,500 copies and partial copies in Greek and other languages, while most ancient classical Greek and Roman texts have fewer than 10 each. There is, moreover, comparatively

little significant variation between these New Testament manuscripts, even those that belong to different textual “families” (groups or branches of texts that have “descended” from the originals).

This extraordinary quantity and quality of the available texts does not tell us if the New Testament writings are historically reliable; however, most scholars think that the large number of manuscripts and portions does indicate that we have essentially what the authors originally wrote. This is obviously a crucial starting point.

The New Testament copies also are much earlier—that is, closer to their original writings—than the classical texts. Most of the New Testament is available from copies that date from 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, copies of the classical texts generally date from 700–1,400 years after their original compositions. This enormous difference indicates that the copies of the New Testament are likely more reliable than the copies of any of its counterparts.³

Generally speaking, critical scholars readily admit these initial two points of manuscript number and date. John A. T. Robinson, for example, 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.”⁴ 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 II CE [the second century AD]....Thus it seems that NT textual criticism possesses a base which is far more advantageous than that for the textual criticism of classical authors.”⁵

These are excellent indicators that we have essentially what the various authors originally wrote. New Testament scholar John Wenham thinks that the overall biblical text is 99.99 percent pure, without any of the differences affecting doctrine.⁶

Other areas of research take the next step by showing that the texts also reliably report the historical facts. Arguments that favor the traditionally accepted authors as being either the original writers or the chief sources behind certain New Testament books supply a strong move in this direction. The best example of this reliability that has been uncovered in recent years is the evidence that Paul was the author of at least the major works that bear his name.⁷

Additionally, approximately one-and-a-half dozen non-Christian, extrabiblical sources confirm many details from Jesus’ life and teachings as found in the Gospels.⁸ Early Christians such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp provide even more confirmation, writing just 10 years or less after the completion of the New Testament.⁹ Archaeological sources do not contribute as much corroboration in New Testament studies as they do in Old Testament studies, but there are a number of indications that, when the details can be checked, the New Testament is often confirmed.¹⁰

There are a number of pieces of evidence that, especially when taken together, confirm the traditional picture regarding the life and teachings of Jesus. This is not to say that all the pertinent questions have been answered;¹¹ but the available evidence from a variety of angles confirms the strong foundation on which we can base the general reliability of the New Testament reports of the historical Jesus.

RECENT PATHS

Conservative scholars still gravitate to the traditional paths to show that the New Testament texts are reliable and many worthwhile insights emerge from the findings of these approaches. The quantity and quality of the texts bring us very close to the original wording. Authorship, source, and various kinds of historical confirmation all contribute data that support the accuracy of the New Testament reports.

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

Among the strategies that critical scholars prefer, there are, nevertheless, many gems to be explored and mined. These treasures, though different, can strengthen the case for the historical reliability of various portions of the New Testament. Some of these prizes can add a more specific component to the general approach preferred by many Christian apologists. We will only be able to pursue one of the avenues to the reliability of various Gospel reports that might be explored here,¹² namely, the criteria of authenticity.

As I noted above, recent critical scholars seldom address the question of New Testament reliability in a wholesale manner; rather, they tend 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. This approach tends to isolate portions of the text, providing individual snippets.

It should be noted here that the methods or principles that contemporary biblical scholars use to analyze texts are actually borrowed from the approach that secular historians regularly apply to ancient texts. One seldom finds a complete list of these principles, perhaps due in part to each scholar's preference for some of them over others. Eight of these rules that are regularly applied to the Gospel material, along with examples of each, are listed below.

Eight Criteria of Authenticity

The first two principles are not usually listed as part of the criteria of authenticity, but they are well recognized by scholars. (1) Early evidence is strongly preferred above later contributions. The difference of even a decade or two can be crucial. Regarding the historical Jesus, any material from between AD 30 and 50 would be exemplary, a time period highly preferred by scholars such as those in the Jesus Seminar.¹³

Reports from such an early date would actually predate the written gospels. A famous example is the list of Jesus' resurrection appearances that Paul supplies in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8. Most critical scholars think that Paul's reception of at least the material on which this early credal statement is based is dated to the AD 30s.¹⁴ Other examples are supplied by the brief credal statements that many scholars find embedded within the book of Acts, which Gerald O'Collins dates to the AD 30s.¹⁵ Another instance is the statement of high christology found in Matthew 11:27 and Luke 10:22, which some scholars date to the AD 50s.¹⁶ Paul's earliest epistles also date from the AD 50s.

(2) One of the strongest evidences possible for reliability is when early sources are derived from eyewitnesses who actually participated in some of the events. Historian David Hackett Fischer dubs this "the rule of immediacy" and terms it "the best relevant evidence."¹⁷ Ancient sources that are both very early and based on eyewitness testimony are a combination that is very difficult to dismiss.

One reason critical scholars take Paul's testimony so seriously is that his writings provide a very early date as well as eyewitness testimony to what Paul believed was a resurrection appearance of Jesus. This is conceded even by atheist scholar Michael Martin.¹⁸ Other crucial instances would concern any eyewitness testimony that can be located in the Gospel accounts.

(3) Independent attestation or confirmation of a report by more than one source¹⁹ is another chief indication that a particular claim may be factual. 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."²⁰ The skeptical Jesus Seminar emphasizes items "attested in two or more independent sources."²¹

Several important examples might be provided. Jesus' miracles are reported in all five of the sources often recognized in the Gospel accounts,²² with some specific occurrences reported in more than one.²³ Jesus' crucial "Son of Man" sayings are also attested in all five sources,²⁴ and the empty tomb is reported in at least three, if not four, of them.²⁵ This helps to explain why these items are taken so seriously by recent critical scholars.

(4) A rather skeptical criterion of authenticity is termed *dissimilarity* or *discontinuity*. It is frequently criticized, yet 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."²⁶

I have already mentioned that Jesus' "Son of Man" sayings are attested to by multiple sources. It can also be shown that, by the principle of dissimilarity, they are unaccounted for by either Jewish or early Christian teachings. 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, they did not apply this to Jesus. Furthermore, even though "Son of Man" is Jesus' favorite self-designation in the Gospels, none of the New Testament epistles attribute this title to Jesus even a single time. The conclusion is that, in all likelihood, Jesus must have used this designation for Himself.²⁷

(5) Another criterion applied to the study of the Gospels is the presence of Aramaic words, substrata (underlying layers), 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's well-known and influential research on whether Jesus utilized the word *abba* as a reference to God (Mark 14:36).²⁸ Jeremias's positive conclusions have been qualified, yet the case remains that this is an instance where Jesus probably employed an unusual term that Jews very rarely applied to God.²⁹ This word as used by Jesus is therefore 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.³⁰ Perhaps the proposed event or saying does even more by illuminating other known incidents and rendering them more intelligible.

Meier thinks that coherence is one of the best indicators of Jesus' teachings. Jesus' comment in Mark 12:18-27 concerning the resurrection of the dead, for example, coheres well with a saying of Jesus on the same subject of the afterlife reported in Matthew 8:11-12 and Luke 13:28-29, as well as other teachings of Jesus.³¹ Meier concludes that another instance in the Gospels is the 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 (e.g., Mark 10:29-31).³²

In addition to 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- or herself, another individual, or event, concerning which the author is *friendly* and has a vested interest.³³ The point is that, in normal circumstances, most people need a sufficient reason to report negative things about something that 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), for instance, begs an adequate cause for exposing such a report about this apostle and pious leader in the early church. This is why the majority of recent critical scholars believe that these are authentic reports.³⁴ Another example is Jesus' saying in Mark 13:32, where in the very same context in which He indicates that He is the Son of the Father, He also declares that He does not know the time of His coming. The report does not explain why the Son of God would not know something about the future.³⁵

The fact that all four gospels report that the first ones to discover Jesus' empty tomb were women is also quite embarrassing. It was not customary for women even to testify in court, especially when it came to crucial matters, which indicates that the early church would not have desired to make them their chief witnesses unless they actually were.³⁶ Lastly, the repeated unbelief and other negative reactions reported about the disciples, both when Jesus told them about His 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 (Matt. 28:17; Luke 24:36-38; John 20:19, 24-25), are further indications, again, that they really did react this way. Why else would the Gospel writers place the disciples, the leaders of the early church, in such a negative light?³⁷

(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.”³⁸

One example of enemy attestation in the Gospels is the repeated testimony that those who opposed Jesus either witnessed His miracles and failed to challenge them (Mark 3:1–6) or attributed them to Satan (Mark 3:22–27), thus acknowledging these events. Marcus Borg of the Jesus Seminar points out that this is one of the reasons that make it “virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist.”³⁹ 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 (Matt. 28:11–15), thereby agreeing that Jesus’ tomb had indeed been discovered to be 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 final consideration concerns the overall methodology employed when arguing for the reliability of the New Testament. 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.”⁴⁰

Along these lines, I have frequently proposed 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 listed above. The event or saying must also be (2) recognized as historical by the vast majority of scholars who address this subject, especially when they oppose the conclusion that they think is nonetheless warranted.

The first of these two standards is clearly the most significant. Strong confirmation of events and sayings, each for multiple reasons, places the emphasis directly on the factual claims themselves. The second standard—recognition by a strong majority of critical scholars—is still very helpful, but this can easily change over time, sometimes without reference to the data itself. This approach, as a chief method of investigation, allows the New Testament’s best historical data to be showcased in order to make the strongest case available.⁴¹

A FAMILIAR CONCLUSION

Traditional apologetic paths still generate several strong reasons for believing in the overall reliability of the New Testament. The various criteria of authenticity discussed above, however, have more specific applications within the Gospel accounts and presently are often the decisive tests employed in the study of the historical Jesus. Christian apologists would do well to investigate these new paths that support a familiar conclusion.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this article, we are not differentiating between the terms *reliability* and *trustworthiness*.
2. A “critical” scholar, as used here, is one who applies (or interacts with) contemporary methods of examining the biblical text.
3. 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), esp. chap. 3.
4. John A. T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 36.
5. Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 2:16–17.
6. John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 186–87.
7. 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, IL: InterVarsity, 1998). See also Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable? A Look at the Historical Evidence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), esp. chaps. 5–8, 11–12.

8. See Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), chap. 9; F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).
9. See J. B. Lightfoot, trans. and ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1891, 1956); cf. Habermas, chap. 10.
10. See R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, The Jesus Library, ed. Michael Green (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), chap. 4; Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, chap. 8.
11. For a general consideration of many important issues, see Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987).
12. 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*, Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), chap. 9.
13. 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.
14. Walter Kasper even argues that this material may have been in use in AD 30! Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1974), 125; cf. Funk and Hoover, 24, 128.
15. Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 109.
16. The Jesus Seminar dates the so-called "Q" tradition that they believe was the source of these passages to the AD 50s (Funk and Hoover, 18, 128).
17. 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*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 38–39. For some concerns by one of the few ancient historians to address metahistorical issues, see Lucian of Samosata, *How to Write History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), esp. 7–15.
18. Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 81.
19. Some scholars have also proposed multiple attestation of literary forms or patterns.
20. Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 197.
21. Funk and Hoover, 26.
22. These five sources are (1) Mark; (2) the material found in Matthew (M) alone; (3) the material found in Luke (L) alone; (4) the "Q" sayings, which many scholars think are the source of the common material in Matthew and Luke; and (5) John.
23. Marcus Borg acknowledges that the attestation of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels is "widespread." Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision; Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987), 61. See also the in-depth study on this topic, including the multiple attestation of Jesus' miracles, in John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), esp. 967–70.
24. Gary Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 102.
25. *Ibid.*, 23.
26. Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (1977; New York: Macmillan, Collier Books Edition, 1992), 202.
27. 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: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 489–532, 633–36.
28. Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 9–30; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972), 100–114.
29. Even Norman Perrin 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. *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 37–41.
30. Cf. W. B. Gallie, "Explanations in History and the Genetic Sciences," in Patrick Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History: Readings from Classical and Contemporary Sources* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 397–98; the idea in critical New Testament research is pursued in Perrin, 43–45.
31. Meier, *Companions and Competitors*, esp. 437–44.
32. *Ibid.*, 69, 72.
33. Grant, 202–3; cf. Funk and Hoover, 23.
34. See, e.g., the listing of scholars in Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 21–22.
35. Donald 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. *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 794n14.
36. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 23–24.
37. For a single example of the many relevant comments here, see Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 60.
38. Maier, 198–99.
39. Borg, 61.
40. Christopher Blake, "Can History be Objective?" in Gardiner, 331.
41. I have utilized this twofold methodology in my publications on Jesus' death and resurrection. For examples, see *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, chap. 1, esp. 8–10, 26–31, and *The Historical Jesus*, 158–67. For an application to the deity of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God, and salvation, see *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, chaps. 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* 2 (2002): esp. 14–15.