

## The Reliability of the Gospels

### The challenge of critical scholarship

- The critics' view of the gospels
  - Early Christianity was an "oral culture."
  - The disciples' spiritual experiences of the post-Easter Jesus permitted them to "reinterpret" (rewrite) the pre-Easter Jesus.
  - Memories were re-shaped and distorted by later community interests.
  - The gospels weren't interested in distinguishing between fact and fiction.
  - The gospels were all written late, with no close connection to eyewitnesses.
- Dating of the NT
- Form criticism
  - Anonymous communities developed constantly evolving, expanding, free-floating oral traditions about Jesus throughout the mid-to-late first century, with little to no interest in historicity or in the testimony of the original eyewitnesses.
  - Step 1: identify the genre/form of a given passage (parable, miracle, etc.).
  - Step 2: treat the passage as a window into a hypothetical social setting in the early church in which this passage could have developed in order to suit the church's needs.
  - "If the Form Critics are right, the disciples must have been translated to heaven immediately after the resurrection." (Vincent Taylor)
- Synoptic problem
  - Which gospel was written first? Which was last? Who used whom as their source? Are there lost written sources behind the gospels?
  - Triple Tradition: material shared by Matthew, Mark, and Luke
  - Double Tradition (Q): material shared by Matthew and Luke (but not Mark)
  - Two-Source Theory: Mark and Q were written first, then both were used by Matthew and Luke independently. (Most popular theory today.)

### Defense of the gospels

- The gospels' concern for historicity
  - Luke 1:1-4; John 21:24; 1 Corinthians 7:10-12
- Gospel authors and the criterion of embarrassment
  - "These [gospel authors] were unlikely characters. Mark and Luke weren't even among the twelve disciples. Matthew was, but as a former hated tax collector, he would have been the most infamous character next to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus! Contrast this with what happened when the fanciful apocryphal gospels were written much later. People chose the names of well-known and exemplary figures to be their fictitious authors—Philip, Peter, Mary, James. Those names carried a lot more weight than the names of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.... There would not have been any reason to attribute authorship to these three less respected people if it weren't true." (Craig Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*)
- Church fathers
  - Papias of Hierapolis (c. 60-163 AD)
    - "The Elder [John?] used to say: Mark, in his capacity as Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately as many things as he recalled from memory—though not in an ordered form—of the things either said or done by the Lord. For he [Mark] neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him, but later, as I said, [he heard and accompanied] Peter, who used to give his teachings in the form of anecdotes, but had no intention of providing an ordered arrangement of the *logia* of the Lord. Consequently Mark did nothing wrong when he wrote down some individual items just as he [Peter] related them from memory. For he made it his one concern not to omit anything he had heard or to falsify anything.... Matthew put

the *logia* in an ordered arrangement in the Hebrew language, but each person interpreted them as best he could.” (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.14-16)

- Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202 AD)

- “Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1)

- The gospels as eyewitness testimony<sup>1</sup>

- Onomastics (the study of names)

	Palestine (330 BC-200 AD)	Gospels-Acts
Top 2 male names (Simon and Joseph)	15.6%	18.2%
Top 9 male names	41.5%	40.3%
Male names attested only once	7.9%	3.9%
Top 2 female names (Mary and Salome)	28.6%	38.9%
Top 9 female names	49.7%	61.1%
Female names attested only once	9.6%	2.5%

- Inclusio (literary “bracketing” or “inclosing”)

- Mark’s chief source:
  - Peter (Mark 3:16; 16:7)
- Luke’s chief sources:
  - Peter (Luke 4:38; 24:34)
  - Women, especially Joanna (Luke 8:1-3; 24:10)
- John’s chief sources:
  - Peter (John 1:41-42; 21:15-19)
  - The Beloved Disciple (John 1:35[?]; 21:24)

- The reliability of the disciples’ memory

- “The eyewitnesses who remembered the events of the history of Jesus were remembering inherently very memorable events, unusual events that would have impressed themselves on the memory, events of key significance for those who remembered them, landmark or life-changing events for them in many cases, and their memories would have been reinforced and stabilized by frequent rehearsal, beginning soon after the event.... We may conclude that the memories of eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus score highly by the criteria for likely reliability that have been established by the psychological study of recollective memory.” (Bauckham, 346.)
- “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26)

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017.