The Historical Data: How Can We Really Know Anything About Jesus?

What You Will Learn in This Chapter:

- The importance of history for Christianity
- The Gospel crisis today
- Proper historical method for finding truth
- Why the Gospels and NT we have today accurately represent the originals
- Why there are good reasons to think the Gospel writers wrote accurate history about the life of Jesus
- How to answer some common objections to these points

The Christian view is that God has acted in human history and thus has exposed his activity, making it open to historical investigation.
Introduction: The importance of HISTORY for Christianity

I. The Christian faith is rooted in a historical claim. The Christian view is that God has acted in human history and thus has exposed his activity, making it open to historical investigation.

II. One thing you must remember: THE CHRISTIAN FAITH CANNOT BE INDIFFERENT TO HISTORY! THIS STUFF MATTERS! If Jesus never existed, never claimed to be divine, never did miracles and so on—then it’s all over. Christianity is FALSE. Pack up your stuff and go home. Sleep in on Sundays and don’t worry about going to church because if that is true, Christianity is delusional.

III. So what we decide on the historical Jesus will certainly influence our view on the significance of Jesus and Christianity in general.

*If Jesus never existed, never claimed to be divine, never did miracles and so on—then it’s all over. Christianity is FALSE.*

Setting the stage: The Gospel Crisis Today

I. THE JESUS SEMINAR

A. What is the “Jesus Seminar”? A small group of highly skeptical scholars that do not represent the mainstream of NT scholarship. The Jesus Seminar was influential in the ’90s, and their impact on popular culture is still with us today.

B. Their position: The Christ of faith is NOT the Jesus of history. The “Jesus of history” and the “Jesus of faith” are NOT the same guy; the latter one is something later Christians just made up, a later myth.

C. According to them, Jesus was just a philosopher who only said about 20% of what is attributed to him in the Gospels. They claim that Jesus never claimed to be God or to forgive sins, and he certainly never did anything miraculous. Jesus’ crucifixion, in their view, was just an unfortunate event. However, later followers of Jesus elevated this “sage” into a deity in their own imaginations.

D. This message of the “real Jesus” is very “sensationalistic” and gets a lot of media coverage—coverage that is unwarranted, underserved,
and disproportionate to their scholarly position (the extreme fringe of NT scholarship).

E. Needless to say, if these conclusions are true, then Christians have been duped and are completely wasting their time worshipping a man as God.

i. “Christianity is currently facing one of its most profound challenges, one that cuts to its heart… The challenge is that for the most part, this volume of literature presents a Jesus who is unrecognizable to the Christian faith as expressed in the historic creeds and confessions of the church.” – Paul Barnett, Jesus and the Logic of History (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997 p. 15)

II. FIVE REASONS TO REJECT JESUS SEMINAR CONCLUSIONS

A. They begin with an unwarranted “hermeneutic of suspicion.”

i. They start off by assuming the sources are not factual: presumption of guilt—guilty until proven innocent; everything is doubted unless it can be independently verified.

ii. This standard is not used for any other ancient document. It is arbitrary.

B. They begin with an anti-supernatural bias.

i. Start off by assuming that miracles cannot occur. Any passage that says Jesus did something miraculous is automatically rejected as “non-historical.”

ii. They have “stacked the deck”! You start by assuming that Jesus was a normal guy who didn’t do any miracles, and, lo and behold, you end up with a Jesus who was a normal guy who didn’t do any miracles!

C. They sometimes make radical claims without any basis or evidence at all.

i. For example – John Dominic Crossan’s theory that the body of Jesus was buried in a shallow grave and dug up and eaten by wild dogs—no evidence is given for this position. It is just asserted!

D. No explanation for the Crucifixion

i. The “Jesus” they end up with is a bland person who never claimed to be God or really said anything that would cause others to dislike him—much less have him crucified.

ii. But the crucifixion of Jesus, as we will see, is one of the BEST ESTABLISHED FACTS WE HAVE about Jesus.
E. Unwarranted emphasis on the Gospel of Thomas
   i. G of T was a document discovered in Egypt after WWII.
   ii. Gnostic writings (matter is evil, salvation through secret knowledge)
   iii. Last sentence says women must become men to be saved!
   iv. Earliest evidence for G of T’s writing is about 150 AD (evidence shows that Thomas was written after the Gospels and dependent upon them), but members of the Jesus Seminar place more emphasis on G of T than the standard canonical Gospels.

III. CULTURAL INFLUENCE
   A. But however erroneous their conclusions are, nevertheless, this type of thinking has had a tremendous influence in our culture and has trickled down to the masses via pop culture movies and sensationalistic new programs and “documentaries.”
   B. We hear things about the NT like “Oh it’s just a bunch of myths and stories”; “Oh the Bible we have today has been corrupted! Some of those later Christians changed what was originally there”; “The real Jesus was a nice guy but not God”; and so on.

   “The Gospel of Thomas—in comparison with the New Testament Gospels is late, not early; secondary not authentic... The distinctive conclusions of the Jesus Seminar are rejected by most scholars in North America and Europe.”
   Craig A. Evans
   Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels
   (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press 2006 p. 7)

IV. SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT
   A. In order to respond to “The Gospel According to Critics and Pop Culture,” we need to know answers to questions like:
      i. What, if anything, can we know about the real Jesus?
      ii. Are there good historical sources about the life of Jesus, and if so, what do they say?
      iii. Does the historicity of the Gospels hold up to sincere, intelligent scrutiny?
iv. Is it possible today for intelligent people to accept the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as accurate historical accounts about the life of Jesus of Nazareth?

B. TO ANSWER QUESTIONS LIKE THESE, WE NEED TWO THINGS: PROPER HISTORICAL METHOD and RELIABLE SOURCES.

Proper Historical Method

I. THE NATURE OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

A. The past survives today only in fragments preserved in texts, artifacts, etc.

B. Almost always, our only link to the past is through someone else’s view.

C. In other words, knowledge of the past only comes to us through fallible sources, i.e., what somebody said.

II. WHAT DEGREE OF CERTITUDE DOES HISTORY GIVE US?

A. Because of the nature of historical knowledge, historical conclusions are held with various degrees of probability, not absolute certainty.

B. No fact about a historical figure or event can be proven with 100% certitude. All historical arguments fall within the realm of probability. This is simply the nature of historical inquiry. We cannot know with 100% certainty that George Washington was the first President of the United States or that Julius Caesar was emperor of Rome. It is always possible that the sources we have for any historical event are lying to us. But the question really is: is it plausible or likely?

C. While many things are logically possible, this does not mean they are reasonable given the evidence. This is the best that can be done given the nature of historical study; we have to talk about strength of probability that an event occurred. Most of the important things in your life are not known with 100% certainty anyway.

D. Human testimony is a means of arriving at the truth, and this testimony can be enough to exclude reasonable doubt.

E. Historical evidence can be CONCLUSIVE BUT NOT COERCIVE. One can be unreasonable to question it, but still, the evidence cannot overpower a committed skeptic’s will.

i. For example – Suppose someone wants to say that Alexander the Great never existed. They can deny all the available
evidence with a wave of the hand by saying that it is all biased, that the authors are lying, etc.

F. “Historical fact” – Either the historical event itself or a correct description of that event (firmly supported by historical evidence)

III. GENERAL PRESUMPTIONS AND BURDEN OF PROOF

A. General presumptions about the historical trustworthiness of the work are VERY IMPORTANT when you are trying to figure out if that document is reliable or not.

B. What should we presume about the trustworthiness of a document? There are three schools of thought:

i. Skepticism – The “guilty until proven innocent” approach. Assume a document is unreliable unless it is verified by something else

   a) Criticism of this approach – If you presume it is unreliable until proven factual, the lack of corroborative data will FORCE you to be AGNOSTIC of the majority of all of ancient history.

ii. Credulity – The “innocent until proven guilty” approach. Here we assume a document tells you the truth unless you have good reason to think otherwise.

   a) Good argument for this position from philosopher Richard Swinburne in what he calls the principle of testimony—that in the absence of counter evidence, we should believe what others tell us they have done or seen.

   b) In the absence of counter evidence, we must assume that historical testimony is true and really occurred. If someone says, “I saw so and so happen,” we ought to believe they say so and so happened unless we have good reasons to think that it didn’t.

   c) Without this principle, Swinburne says we would have very little knowledge of anything. Clearly, most of our beliefs about the world are based on what others have told us—beliefs about geography, science, or history for example. All of our knowledge about things beyond our own direct experience is through the testimony of others.

   d) Even if we find out that a source is untrustworthy, that discovery itself will have to come from other sources that we do take as trustworthy.
e) Imagine *if you never took anything at face value*. What if you held the position “never believe anything at face value unless you can back that story up from someone else,” but then you ask someone else—do you believe them? Do you have to back up the backup? This can lead to an infinite regress. You have to take things at face value sometimes to know anything at all.

iii. Neutrality – Striking a Balance

a) Important point to keep in mind: *It is impossible to corroborate every detail of an ancient text?* Since one cannot possibly corroborate everything, the best we can do is establish a general reliability.

b) Hence the best historical procedure is to begin with an open mind and attempt to form a general presumption about the trustworthiness of a document using evidence and historiographical criteria.

c) If the things we can check out are factual, the document should earn the benefit of the doubt on the things one cannot check up on. If general reliability is established, the assumption at that point is that the whole is factual unless there is good reason to think otherwise.

d) Once established as a generally reliable document, a historically favorable presumption prevails, and the burden of proof falls on deniers at that point.

IV. IMPORTANT CRITERIA USED IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

A. These are tools that help a historian discern the truth in historical accounts. These are the three most important criteria.

B. Criterion of Multiple Attestation (most important criterion) – The more sources you have saying the same thing, the more likely that it’s true.
i. With most of ancient history, you don't even get two independent sources (but as we will see, the empty tomb has at least four!).

C. Criterion of Embarrassment – When a writer includes material that is embarrassing or counterproductive to their cause, this indicates they are probably telling the truth.

i. Liars don't go out of their way to make up material that is hurtful to their cause—including material that is embarrassing—or counterproductive to their case, which indicates truthfulness.

ii. For example, if you want to make up a lie about Jesus being God, you don’t put in stuff that says Jesus was betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, and doesn’t know the day or the hour of the end times like we see in Mark 13:32.

D. Criterion of Coherence – Once we have a certain amount of historical material in hand, whatever fits well with these already known facts has a good chance of being historical too.

i. Jesus’ Rejection and Execution – Fact: Jesus met a violent death and condemnation at the hands of Jewish and Roman authorities.

ii. You cannot domesticate and tame the real Jesus.

iii. What would explain this event? Jesus ticked people off!

E. Criteria like these make the material pass from possible to probable.

“A tweedy poetaster who spent his time spinning out parables and Japanese koans, a literary aesthete who toyed with first-century deconstructionism, or a bland Jesus who simply told people to look at the lilies of the field—such a Jesus would threaten no one, just as the university professors who create him threaten no one. The historical Jesus did threaten, disturb, and infuriate people… A Jesus whose words and deeds would not alienate people, especially powerful people, is not the historical Jesus.”

John Meier

(A Marginal Jew, v. I p. 17)
V. HOW DO WE REACH A HISTORICAL CONCLUSION?

A. The nature of historical investigation is to test historical hypotheses. How is this done?

B. We gather the data and make what is called an INFEERENCE TO THE BEST EXPLANATION. This is done in three steps:
   i. Gather all the relevant information.
   ii. Determine a pool of options to explain the event (based on our background beliefs).
   iii. Select the best of the competing explanations by seeing how well they explain the evidence.

C. What do we mean by “best”?
   i. The best explanation has the most explanatory scope—meaning that the best explanation covers the most facts.
   ii. The best explanation has the most explanatory power and plausibility—meaning that the best explanation makes the most sense given what we know (our “background knowledge”).
   iii. The best explanation is less ad hoc—meaning that the best explanation is relatively “simple” and sounds less “made up.”

A theory is ad hoc if it uses too many assumptions without evidence, giving the appearance that one is trying to save one’s theory rather than find out what really happened.

VI. THREE FALLACIES TO BE AVOIDED

A. The “All or Nothing” Fallacy – “If there is any error in a source, then we have to throw it all out.”
   i. NO HISTORIAN WOULD EVER THROW OUT A SOURCE JUST BECAUSE IT CONTAINED SOME ERROR.
   ii. A document doesn’t have to be perfect to give us good, reliable information.

B. “The Absolute Certitude” Fallacy – “We can’t say anything happened in history unless we are absolutely certain it did.”
   i. If this were true we couldn’t know any history at all.
   ii. History doesn’t ever give us absolute 2+2=4 certitude. History speaks in terms of probabilities.

C. The “Bias” Fallacy – “People who write history are biased and so can’t be trusted.”
   i. Historians are well aware of this problem and deal with it all the time.
ii. Can we use Jewish sources of the Holocaust even though Jews wrote it?

iii. If the presence of bias or error meant you had to throw the source out, WE WOULD KNOW NOTHING ABOUT THE PAST (The Roman historian Tacitus was “biased,” etc.).

iv. Genetic fallacy – Faulting a belief merely because of origins without any proof that those origins have somehow invalidated the view.

v. We all have “biases,” but people can transcend it too. People convert from one worldview to another all the time.

D. Now that we understand something about the proper historical method, we need to look at the sources.

“Faith and truthful history are not necessarily at odds. Criteria of authenticity, which are remarkably vigorous in their application to the Gospels, confirm the essential core of Jesus’ teaching... Claims that the Gospels are unreliable, full of myth and legend, and so biased that knowledge of what Jesus really said and did cannot be recovered are excessive and unwarranted.”

Craig A. Evans,
Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels
(Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press 2006 p. 233-4)

What are the Historical Sources for the Life of Jesus?

I. THE “BIBLE” IS NOT ONE BOOK!

A. The Bible is a collection of different sources written over a long period of time. The same is true for the New Testament.

B. This point is obvious to some, but not everybody knows this.

II. THREE MAIN CATEGORIES OF SOURCES:

A. Gospels

   i. The Gospels “proper” and their source material

   ii. Most scholars today think the Gospel writers used sources.
They name these sources this way:

a) “Q” (German “quelle” or “source”) is the material that is found in Matthew and Luke but not Mark.

b) “M” is the name scholars give to all the material that is in Matthew’s Gospel but not anywhere else.

c) “L” is what they call the material unique to Luke.

d) “Oral tradition” is all the stuff the disciples talked about verbally.

B. NT Epistles

i. The New Testament sources outside the Gospels, like the works of Paul

C. Non-Christian Sources

i. Places in non-Christian sources where Jesus is mentioned. The Jewish historian Josephus is a good example.
III. NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES

A. We are not going to spend much time on these in this course because they don’t give us much detail; however, they do offer a broad outline of Jesus’ life that corroborates what we see in the Gospel accounts, so it’s worth mentioning here.

B. If we look at the works of Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian, and the Babylonian Talmud, we can gather that there was this man named Jesus, who was a “so called Christ” with wise and persuasive teachings and a doer of “miracles” and other sorts of “sorcery” and who got into trouble with the Jewish authorities and was crucified on a cross.

C. Are these independent sources (did they get their information independently or from Christians)? It’s hard to say for the Roman historians, but we can say with confidence that Josephus, at least, is an independent source.1

IV. WHY THE NT EPISTLES ARE IMPORTANT HISTORICAL SOURCES2

A. Why we need to treat the NT Epistles seriously as historical sources for Jesus

i. COMPLETE INFORMATION – Obviously when doing history, we need to look at all the relevant sources that talk about Jesus.

ii. OLDER INFORMATION – The NT epistles are probably the oldest documents we have about Jesus. The epistles are the first historical documents referring to Christianity! It’s a matter of common sense that earlier documents should be given more weight than later documents.

iii. INCIDENTAL INFORMATION – The epistles are valuable because they offer “incidental” information about Jesus written to people who are already persuaded of Christianity. They are not written to be a history of the life of Jesus; rather, the epistles are written to address certain issues in the churches and are not trying to teach new information about the life of Jesus. So the information they do offer is simply mentioned “in passing” and is incidental and therefore very valuable since they cannot be said to have an apologetical motive.

iv. “…scholars who seek to recover the historical Jesus must not omit the letters from their considerations, as they often

1 See Robert E. Van Voorst, Jesus Outside the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 81-104.
do. Many reconstructed versions of Jesus are quite unlike the exalted figure whose proclamation was, as we have shown, presumed in the letters.” Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*, 56

v. So the epistles are important because we want 1) all of the relevant data, 2) the earliest sources we have about Jesus, and 3) these sources cannot be said to be guilty of trying to persuade outside audiences about the life of Jesus. This makes these documents very valuable sources of historical information.

B. IT IS A HUGE OVERSIGHT TO IGNORE THE NT EPISTLES AS SOURCES ABOUT THE HISTORICAL JESUS.

C. So what do we get from the NT epistles? IN OTHER WORDS, HOW MUCH COULD WE KNOW ABOUT THE HISTORICAL JESUS IF THERE WERE NO GOSPELS AND WE JUST HAD TO GO ON THE EPISTLES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?

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**Jesus in the New Testament Epistles**

A SAMPLE OF BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS ABOUT THE HISTORICAL JESUS MENTIONED IN THE LETTERS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

- Jesus descended from Abraham and David (Gal 3:16, Rom 1:3)
- Jesus was “born of a woman” (Gal 4:4)
- Jesus gathered disciples Peter, John and had a relative named James (Gal 1:19, 2:9, 1 Cor 9:5)
- Jesus was a model of moral excellence (Phil 2:6-8, 2 Cor 8:9, Rom 15:3-8)
- Jesus opposed divorce (1 Cor 7:10)
- Jesus had a “last supper” (1 Cor 11:23-26)
- Jesus testified before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim 6:13)
- Jesus was killed at the instigation of the Jews and crucified (1 Thess 2:14-15, Gal 3:1, and 1 Cor 2:2)
- After Jesus was buried, he rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples (1 Cor 15:3-8, 1 Pet 3:21-22)
- Jesus is Son of God, Christ, Messiah, Lord (2 Cor 1:19, 2:12, Rom 1:3, 9:5, 15:8, 1 Cor 15:3)
- Jesus is “Christ, God over all” (Rom 9:5)
- Jesus was sinless and died for all (2 Cor 5:14-21, 1 Pet 3:18)
- Jesus will judge the living and the dead (1 Pet 4:5)
i. From a summary from Paul and James, we get a consistent picture that closely parallels what we see in the actual Gospels.

ii. The NT letters show that key biographical details, teachings, and exalted views of Jesus that we see in the later Gospels were convictions that were widespread and held early on—confirming that what we see in the Gospels was not a later invention.

“...the persistent conviction that Paul knew next to nothing of the teachings of Jesus must be rejected.”
Dale Allison,

V. ARE THE GOSPELS HISTORICALLY RELIABLE?
A. Since the NT and especially the Gospels are SO misunderstood and attacked in our popular culture, we need to spend some time defending these works as historically reliable sources.

B. VERY IMPORTANT POINT – We are aiming to show historical reliability, not divine inspiration!

C. We treat the NT as we would any other ancient historical document. How reliable are these documents? We determine this by standard historiographical criteria.

D. WE ARE NOT GOING TO ASSUME THE BIBLE IS INSPIRED BY GOD NOR ARE WE GOING TO ASSUME IT IS HISTORICALLY RELIABLE.

E. We are going to give reasons (argument) why we should take it as historically reliable.

F. The standard of comparison here should be other events of ancient history that are commonly accepted.

VI. TWO KEY QUESTIONS ON GOSPEL RELIABILITY:
A. Is the NT we have today the same as the original documents?

B. Were the original documents themselves historically accurate?

C. We need to answer “yes” to both of these questions if we are going to have access to historically reliable information about Jesus.

D. We will proceed this way: we are going to work our way backwards
in time—first giving good reasons why our copy of the NT (especially the Gospels) is the same as the originals and secondly giving good reasons to think that those originals were historically accurate accounts.

Is the NT we have today the same as the original documents?

I. WHAT DID WORKS LIKE THE GOSPELS ORIGINALLY SAY?

A. “Autographs” – the original works

B. “Manuscripts” – the copies. Manuscripts were sometimes written on scrolls of papyrus (it was easy to get and not expensive).

C. We don’t have the originals anymore. What we have is made from copies.

D. You should know that the original text has passed through a copying process. This was an imperfect process that was done by hand, meaning that there are typos and sometimes mistakes.

E. KEY QUESTION: How do we know our copy matches the original?

II. WHY WE CAN BE VIRTUALLY CERTAIN THAT OUR COPY OF THE TESTAMENT IS THE SAME AS THE ORIGINAL?

A. We have very old copies: The manuscripts we have are very old—a lot older than we have with other historical manuscripts.

   i. Manuscripts we have go back to AD 125, with more in the 2nd century and many more in the 3rd century.

   ii. If someone says we can’t trust the Gospels because of the gap between the originals and the copies, then we would have to cast even MORE DOUBT on our knowledge of ALMOST ALL OF ANCIENT HISTORY—a DOUBLE STANDARD.

   iii. So by comparison, the Gospels do very well in the age category. Again, we need to use a consistent and reasonable standard.

B. We have lots of copies – We have bunches of copies with small variances—the more the better since more copies can help us figure out the original wording and small variances between the manuscripts.

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3 For a very good popular presentation of this topic, see Mark Roberts, Can We Trust the Gospels? Investigating the Reliability of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); the listing here is derived from pages 25–37.
i. The number of manuscripts is about 20 times larger than the average of other historically comparable writings. There is a WEALTH of manuscript evidence to work with.

C. We have a very trustworthy methodology – We have a very trustworthy methodology for reconstructing the original.
i. “Textual criticism”

ii. Gather up all the manuscripts; set them side by side and look at the differences (“variants”).

iii. This is a VERY OBJECTIVE DISCIPLINE, giving us a very confident picture.

iv. There are about 138,000 words in the Greek New Testament that have as many as 400,000 textual variants in the manuscripts.

v. This number may seem high, but it’s because there are SO MANY MANUSCRIPTS!

vi. The great majority of these variants are SPELLING ERRORS AND SYNONYMS.

vii. LESS THAN 1% OF ALL VARIANTS ARE MEANINGFUL—that is, have any chance of being mistaken from the autographs.

viii. THE NT TRANSMISSION PROCESS HAS BEEN REMARKABLY STABLE throughout the centuries.

We can be virtually certain that the Gospels we have today are the same as the originals.

D. ALMOST NO ONE DOUBTS THIS ANYMORE—even the critics admit we have a very accurate Gospel of the originals.

E. Another piece of popular nonsense exposed – Anytime you hear someone say, “This was all written into the Bible later,” or “The Gospels were corrupted,” they run up against a mountain of problems.

i. How could “they” corrupt all the manuscripts? There is an abundance of manuscripts over a wide geographical distribution. No one could have corrupted ALL the manuscripts (try changing the NY Times after it has been published and distributed!).

ii. Besides, all orthodox Christians would have met any corruption with outcry. They could not have been falsified while apostles were still living to act as a check upon error.

F. We can be virtually certain that the Gospels we have today are the same as the originals. No other ancient work is available in so many copies and languages yet all agreeing in content (differences are minor and often consist of unintentional mistakes).
“The amount of material we have today for determining the wording of the autographs is staggering: almost 6,000 Greek New Testament manuscripts, as many as 20,000 manuscripts for other versional manuscripts, and more than one million quotations by Church Fathers. In comparison with the average ancient Graeco-Roman author, the copies of the New Testament are more than a 1,000 times more plentiful.”


In J. D. Barry & L. Wentz (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (J. D. Barry & L. Wentz, Ed.). Bellingham, WA.
Were the Original Gospels Historically Accurate?

I. HOW DID THIS MATERIAL COME TO BE?
   A. The NT docs were separate and written independently – The New Testament you have today was not always just one book; it's actually a collection of different works written at different times yet all completed within 60 years of Jesus' lifetime.
   B. Process: A conservative faithful tradition preceded the writing of the NT documents.
   C. That's a general overview of how the Gospels came into being; now let's look at some details.

II. A HELPFUL MNEMONIC DEVICE: “A.I.D” – ABLE, INTENDING, DID4
   A. The Gospel writers were able to write accurate history.
   B. They were intending to write accurate history.
   C. And they actually did write accurate history in the areas we can check up on.

Why The Gospel Writers Were Able To Write Accurate History

I. THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH EYEWITNESSES
   A. We have four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
   B. If the traditional authorship is correct, then two of the Gospels (Matthew and John) were written by eyewitnesses, while the other two (Mark and Luke) were written in close contact with eyewitness testimony. The historical evidence says Mark received his information from Peter while Luke received his information from other eyewitnesses.
   C. There is a VERY STRONG case for traditional authorship.
   D. Internal Evidence (evidence within the NT text itself):
      i. Criterion of Embarrassment suggests traditional authorship for three of the four Gospels.
         a) Matthew wasn't an apostle but was a tax collector – tax collectors were viewed as suspect – thus probably not invented

4 This device is derived from the work of Craig Blomberg, although the arrangement differs here.
b) Mark wasn’t an apostle; why make him up as an author?

c) Luke wasn’t an apostle; why make up that name?

d) So we have three relatively “unspectacular writers.” Why would someone make up names like this? Why not make up a more authoritative name? Peter? Paul? James? Thomas?

ii. Moreover, details in the Gospel of John suggest the author was an eyewitness:5

a) Author was a Jew with detailed knowledge of Hebrew feasts customs and scriptures

b) Author was a Palestinian with his knowledge of local geography

c) Author was an Eyewitness—given the repeated compelling references to people, places, etc.

d) Author was an Apostle—given his acquaintance with the activities of the Twelve

...the Fourth Gospel has been deemed more historically reliable than ever thought possible... To simply dismiss the gospel of John as historically suspect is now passé.

e) “For the last fifty years scholars have returned to this gospel with a keen interest in historical sources... overturning the conventional wisdom, the Fourth Gospel has been deemed more historically reliable than ever thought possible... To simply dismiss the gospel of John as historically suspect is now passé.”6

5 This is a summary of the classic argument given by B.F. Westcott’s The Gospel According to St. John (1908). For a modern defense of John the apostle being the author of this work, see Craig Blomberg, The Historical Reliability of St. John's Gospel (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press: 2001) pp. 17-44, who concludes, “Despite widespread assumption to the contrary, a strong case can still be mounted for John the son of Zebedee as author of the fourth Gospel.” p. 40.

E. External Evidence (evidence outside the NT):
   
i. Unanimous ancient testimony supports traditional authorship, and no clear competing tradition exists.

   ii. Everybody writing in ancient history in the 1st or 2nd century says that Matthew wrote Matthew, Luke wrote Luke, Mark wrote Mark, and John wrote John.\(^7\)

   a) Example – Papias and Irenaeus support it.

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\(^7\) A qualification needs to be made here regarding John. The external witness to the authorship of John is unanimous apart from a question that arises in the fourth century with the writing of Eusebius. Although Eusebius himself also believes the apostle John wrote this Gospel (Eccl. Hist. 3.24.5-13), he also says, commenting on a passage from Papias, that there were two people with the name “John” in the early church. Sometimes modern critical scholars will make much of this possible ambiguity between two “Johns”; one being John the Apostle and the second John the “elder” and argue that since the epistles of 2 and 3 John begin with one who calls himself the “elder,” these scholars infer that this second John the “elder” is the author of not only 2 and 3 John but also of John’s Gospel. Three responses to this are possible. First, it is not at all clear that there really are two “Johns” and many have contested driving a wedge between the two (see, for example, John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark, and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Downer’s Grove; Intervarsity Press, 1992) 127-8). Second, if there are two Johns, the ancient external evidence still in large measure supports the view that John the Apostle (not John the elder) is the author of the Gospel and this testimony is sufficient to offset any ambiguities that might be found in Papias in favor of apostolic authorship. One may respond that since Papias is the earliest witness, it could be that everyone else is dependent on Papias and, potentially, on a misinterpretation of him. However, not only is it farfetched to assert that everyone in the ancient world based their position on a misinterpretation of Papias, we know this cannot be true for at least Eusebius who a) does not misinterpret Papias and yet b) still holds to John the Apostle as the author of this Gospel. Eusebius says that John the apostle is the Beloved Disciple (Eccl. Hist. 3.23.1) and that “his Gospel, which is known to all the churches under heaven, must be acknowledged as genuine.” (Eccl. Hist. 3.24.1). If Eusebius had good reason to hold to traditional authorship without misinterpreting Papias, why couldn’t others? Finally, even if the second John the elder is the author, Eusebius indicates that this “John” is to be listed as one of the “friends” of the holy apostles (Hist. Eccl. 3.39.2) since Papias appeals to him as a disciple of Jesus with exceptional authority (Hist. Eccl. 3.39.3–4). Hence, we can agree with Wenham, “But even if a second John did exist, he would still be a direct link between Jesus and Papias—he and Ariston are called ‘the Lord’s disciples’ by Papias in exactly the same way as the seven named apostles.” (*Redating Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 127-8). Thus, even if the second John the Elder wrote the Gospel of John, it would still, in that case, be authored by someone who was at least in close contact with other eyewitnesses.
b) So the external evidence (evidence outside the Bible) is unanimous. This should be taken VERY SERIOUSLY.

“Despite frequent claims to the contrary, the evidence remains strong that the Gospels were written by the authors to whom they are traditionally ascribed—apostles or close associates of the apostles.”

Craig Blomberg
(The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, p. 41)

F. What does traditional authorship get us?
   i. Shows that these Gospels are written by either eyewitnesses or close associates to eyewitnesses
   ii. Sets a cap on when these accounts could be written—with within the life span of these traditional authors (more on this later)
   However, even if this case for traditional authorship is mistaken, STILL it is highly probable that eyewitnesses were available for consultation at the time the Gospels were written.

G. N.T. scholar Richard Baukham (Jesus and the Eyewitnesses) makes a strong argument for this position.—To summarize:
   i. Following the model of pagan historians, the early Christians were diligent about getting the true story and following the best historical practice of their day; this would mean getting eyewitness testimony.
   ii. The disciples and people who learned directly from Jesus had been recounting what they saw for decades through preaching and teaching. This started almost immediately after the events took place, and that talk never stopped. This is how Jesus became famous in his own lifetime as a miracle worker.
   iii. In the period of time up to the writing of the Gospels, there were eyewitnesses—people who had directly heard and seen Jesus and witnessed the events—still around and available as sources.
   iv. We know this from multiple attestation! The Gospel of Luke explicitly claims to have been in touch with eyewitnesses:
      a) “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been
accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.” (Luke 1:1–4)

v. Also, the author of John claims to be an eyewitness:

a) “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory.” (Jn 1:14)

b) “He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe.” (Jn 19:35)

c) “This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true.” (Jn 21:24)

d) Not only Luke and John but other early Christians like Papias and Quadratus say they had access to eyewitness accounts (see Baukham for citations), which means that the other Gospel writers did too since the time to which these early Christians refer is the same time period as the writing of the Gospels.

e) Additionally, several other NT writers claim to either be eyewitnesses or have access to them, indicating that eyewitnesses were accessible at least at the time of these writings. Moreover, these

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8 We can also mention that in Acts 16, Luke joins Paul on his journey to visit different cities in the area, but in Acts 21, Luke says they eventually went to Jerusalem: “After these days we made ready and went up to Jerusalem. And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge... When we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James; and all the elders were present” (Acts 21:15-18). This is another reason to think that Luke came into contact with the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life while he was there with those elders in Jerusalem.

9 For more on John as an eyewitness, see Baukham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, 358-411.

10 Paul claims to have visited the disciples on more than one occasion and thus had access to eyewitness accounts: “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other...”
confident appeals illustrate a sincere concern for getting eyewitness accounts.

III. THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN RELATIVELY EARLY (THAT IS, EARLY ENOUGH!)

A. It’s a matter of common sense that the earlier the source, the more confidence we have in its accuracy. There are a lot of good arguments for a very early composition of the Gospels—but we won’t go into those arguments here.11

B. The latest date that the NT works could have been written is approximately 95 A.D. because that is when patristic writers began to cite them in their own works.

C. We do not need to make use of the early dating of the Gospels, because even the most commonly accepted critical dates are “early enough.”
  i. Matthew – 65–85 AD
  ii. Mark 60–75 AD
  iii. Luke 65–95 AD
  iv. John 75–100 AD

D. So even if we accept these dates held by the majority of NT scholars, THEY WERE STILL ALL WRITTEN WITHIN ABOUT 30–70 YEARS OF JESUS’ DEATH.

E. This means that even at the latest, there is only a 35- to 60-year gap between the events in the life of Jesus and the writing of the first gospel.

F. The Problem of the “Thirty-Five-Year Gap.” Is it a real problem?

G. NO, BECAUSE THE GOSPEL SOURCE MATERIAL IS OLDER THAN THE GOSPELS THEMSELVES.

H. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GOSPEL SOURCE MATERIAL
   i. The Gospel writers used earlier sources when writing their works.
      a) “Source Criticism” – analyzing and studying the sources used by the biblical authors
   ii. Luke 1:1–4 says “many” have already “set down an orderly account” and “handed on” (this is the language of oral tradition) that you, too, “may know the truth.” Luke says explicitly what was certainly true for the other writers—the availability of earlier Gospel source material.
   iii. This source material was CERTAINLY A VERY STRONG ORAL TRADITION and probably a WRITTEN TRADITION AS WELL.
   iv. Strong Oral Tradition – The Power of Memorization Skills in Oral Cultures

In those times, oral tradition was even considered more reliable than written sources.

   a) Now, modern people like us don’t put much stock in oral transmission and memory, but in ancient Palestine this was not the case! In a predominantly oral culture like ancient Palestine, the skill of memorization was very refined.

   b) Christianity grew up in a strongly oral culture. This was a culture where people didn’t write stuff down that often. Here memory was a highly praised skill.

   c) In those times, oral tradition was even considered more reliable than written sources. (Papias, for example, trusted the oral information that he received by the successors of the apostles more than written texts [Eusebius Ecc. Hist. 3:39, 3–4].)

   d) Just to give some modern examples of remarkable memory skills in oral cultures:
      i. Yugoslavian folk singers have memorized
stories of up to 100k words in length (having flexibility within certain limits—the plot and main events stay the same while the precise wording varied 10-40%, saying the same thing in different ways, adding details, changes in sequence, etc.).

ii. Some Muslims today can memorize the entire Koran; doing so allows you to be called a “hafiz” and be highly esteemed.

iii. Rabbinic Memorization – In rabbinic circles, strong memorization ability was expected and common. Memorization skills were highly praised in rabbinic circles. Some memorized the entire OT plus a good portion of the oral law! Rabbi Jesus probably had his disciples memorize important teachings.

e) Moreover, about 80% of Jesus’ teaching is in a form (short stories and parables) that is easy to memorize anyway.

f) In a culture like this, to accurately transmit the teachings and facts about Jesus over a mere 30 years is NO PROBLEM.

“…in societies where reliance on memory is essential in large areas of life in which it no longer matters much to us, people took the trouble to remember and used techniques of memorizing. Memory was not just a faculty, but a vital skill with techniques to be learned […] In a predominately oral society, not only do people deliberately remember but also teachers formulate their teachings so as to make them easily memorable.”

(Richard Bauckham, 281-2)

g) So there is nothing in this oral stage of the Gospel tradition that should cause us to think historical details were lost; on the contrary, there are good reasons to think that the acts and teachings of Jesus were carefully preserved.
I. WRITTEN GOSPEL SOURCES?

i. It is also very likely that some source material was written.

ii. Taking notes to SUPPLEMENT oral teaching was a widespread practice in the ancient world. Jewish rabbis often used private notebooks written in a kind of shorthand, so it’s not unreasonable to think that Jesus’ disciples adopted the practice.

iii. “It is not likely, despite the claims of some, that the highly literate Christian community of the first century will have studiously refrained from putting into writing traditions of the life and teaching of Jesus for the first thirty years of its existence...” David Wenham, “Source Criticism” in Marshall, I. H. (1977). New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster) 137–139.

iv. We know for a fact that some Gospel material made it into writing very early before the Gospels were written because it is in the NT epistles.

v. For example, Gospel material was well known when Paul was writing. Letters of Paul indicate that Paul has a fairly detailed knowledge of gospel material since he says things that very closely parallel the Gospel accounts.

   a) Example: 1 Cor 11:23-5 – The words of the institution of the Eucharist are very similar to Mk 14:22-4, Mt 26:26-8. and Lk 22:19-20 but 1 Corinthians was probably written in the mid ’50s!

   b) The book of James is full of passages that closely resemble the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. James makes allusions to Gospel material all the time (alluding to Mark, Q, and M). Because of this, many scholars argue that James must have been very familiar with Gospel material. But James was written very early, possibly even in the ’40s! Since James is using Jesus’ words as an authority, it presupposes that these words were already well known, established, and widespread prior to the ’40s!

   c) This means that these Gospel traditions were well known and established in the earliest stages of Christianity!

vi. One thing is for sure: we know for a fact that SOME GOSPEL MATERIAL MADE IT INTO WRITTEN FORM EARLIER THAN THE GOSPELS because it is in those epistles.
J. Eyewitness Reinforcement
   i. Don’t forget; eyewitnesses were always present to reinforce this Gospel source tradition.
   ii. In early Christianity, the apostolic leadership was still available to “check up” on any errors and correct them.
   iii. Remember that the early Christians believed this stuff was important—the common memory of leaders and the community would surely have spoken out against corruptions.
   iv. These Gospel traditions were being constantly reinforced by living eyewitness accounts.
   v. The fact that these eyewitnesses remained accessible makes a huge difference since the whole process of retelling oral history was governed by the continuing presence and testimony of eyewitness accounts.

   i. Oral tradition was very reliable in that culture.
   ii. Written sources were very likely as well.
   iii. Eyewitnesses were present to reinforce the traditions.

O.W.E. - Why the “Thirty Five Year Gap” is Not a Real Problem

The “Thirty Five Year Gap” between the Life of Jesus and the Writing of the Gospels was filled by oral tradition, the likelihood of written sources, and eyewitness presence.

Stage 1: 28-30 A.D.
Stage 2: 30-65 A.D.
Stage 3: 65 - 90 A.D.

Oral tradition was very reliable
Written sources were very likely
Eyewitnesses present to reinforce
III. CONCLUSION: SINCE THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH EYEWITNESSES AND WERE WRITTEN RELATIVELY EARLY, THE GOSPEL WRITERS WERE ABLE TO WRITE ACCURATE HISTORY.

The evidence is compelling that the New Testament Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—are our best sources for understanding the historical Jesus. The New Testament Gospels are based on eyewitness testimony and truthfully and accurately relate the teaching, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Craig A. Evans,
Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels
(Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2006, p. 7)

Five Reasons Why The Gospel Writers Intended To Write Accurate History

I. TWO GOSPEL WRITERS EXPLICITLY SAY SO, INDICATING THE GENRE OF THE WORK.

A. The “genre” of a work is the type of writing it is. So, for example, historical biography is one type of genre.

B. Luke: “…it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.” (Luke 1:1–4)

C. This indicates that the genre of Luke is intended to be historical, a “historical narrative.” Since Matthew and Mark resemble Luke and share the same style, we should think they have the same genre as Luke.

D. What about John?

i. Contrary to the modern idea of writing off John as non-historical, there are good reasons to think John is intending to convey historical truth too.

ii. “He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe.” (John 19:35)
iii. “This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true.” (John 21:24)

iv. There are good reasons to think John is historical and not just a “spiritual work.”

II. WILLINGNESS TO INCLUDE EMBARRASSING DETAILS SUGGESTS HISTORICAL INTENT.

A. Again, sometimes historical intent can be seen. This is because the writers were honest enough to include embarrassing material.

B. Embarrassing material like:

i. Jesus isn’t believed by his own brother (John 7:5).

ii. Jesus is deserted by many of his own followers (John 6:66).

iii. Jesus is called a “drunkard” (Mt 11:19).

iv. Jesus hangs out with sinners such as a prostitute (Luke 7:36–39).

C. Including these embarrassing details indicates an unwillingness to fudge the story. The most plausible reason to include material like this is because it really happened, which, again, indicates an intent to relay the truth.

III. THE GOSPEL WRITERS WERE HIGHLY MOTIVATED TO PASS ON THE WORDS AND ACTIONS OF JESUS ACCURATELY.

A. Given the theological motivations of the Gospel writers, they would have been highly motivated to tell the facts as best they knew them.

“The early Christian movement was interested in the genuinely past history of Jesus because they regarded it as religiously relevant...at the deepest level, it was for profoundly theological reasons—their understanding of God and salvation—that early Christians were concerned with faithful memory of the really past story of Jesus.”

since they believed the salvation of others depended on it. We see, for example, an emphasis on the words of Jesus.

i. “Everyone who hears these words of mine…” (Mt 7:24)

ii. “The words I have spoken are spirit and life…” (John 6:63)

iii. Peter says, “You alone have the words to eternal life” (John 6:67)

B. The Gospel writers at least believed in the importance of Jesus’ words and thus they would be highly motivated to recall and pass them on accurately.

IV. NO GOOD REASON TO LIE OR MAKE UP A MYTH THAT MIGHT GET THEM KILLED

A. Perhaps the strongest reason for thinking the Gospels are factual is because there was nothing to gain by fudging the material.

B. Promoting Jesus as a divine being in early Palestine could land you in a lot of trouble. Your life could be in danger. We know that some were willing to be tortured rather than renounce their faith.

C. There was nothing to gain in worldly terms for such a deception. This willingness to undergo suffering and death shows sincerity (even pagan sources report Christians dying for their faith).

**Five Reasons To Think The Gospel Writers DID Write Accurate History**

I. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CRITERIA STRONGLY INDICATES HISTORICAL ACCURACY IN CRITICAL AREAS.

A. This is very important. We will discuss this in more detail later, but for now, you should now that the criteria of embarrassment and multiple attestation show not just the overall orientation of an author but that particular details of their accounts are very probably true.

B. We’ll look at this more in a later chapter on the Resurrection. For now, it’s enough to know that important Gospel details are corroborated by multiple attestation in early independent sources.

II. ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS CONFIRM HISTORICAL ACCURACY IN SOME AREAS.

A. Hundreds of archaeological findings support Gospel details. To list some prominent examples:

i. 1961 discovery of the inscription of Pontius Pilate was the first corroboration outside of the Bible of the man who sentenced Christ.
ii. November 1990: There are good arguments to show that the burial grounds of Caiaphas the high priest were discovered in a burial cave in south Jerusalem. Prior to this discovery some biblical scholars had argued against the historicity of such a person.

iii. Herodian Coins provide archaeological support for some of the King Herods mentioned in the Gospels.

iv. Pool of Bethesda – This is where the Gospel of John says Jesus cured a sick man. Up until the 19th century the only historical evidence for this pool was the Gospel of John, chapter 5—and since it hadn't ever been discovered, critics said the Gospel of John must be inaccurate and written too late to know. Then in the 19th century an archaeological discovery confirmed that the Gospel of John was right:

a) There is a pool named Bethesda.

b) It is where John says it is (near the Sheep Gate).

c) It has five porches like John said it did.

d) Thus the archaeological evidence affirming the historical accuracy of John's account

v. “Verisimilitude” is a term used to mean confirmation by external sources. NT archaeology helps confirm that what the NT describes is an accurate portrayal of the way things really were in first-century Palestine.

vi. “The New Testament Gospels and Acts exhibit a great amount of verisimilitude. They speak of real people (such as Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, Annas, Caiaphas, Herod Agrippa I and II, Felix and Faustus) and real events (deaths of John the Baptist and Agrippa I). They speak of real places (villages, cities, roads, lakes and mountains) that are clarified and corroborated by other historical sources and by archaeology… If the New Testament Gospels were nothing more than fictions and fables about a man who never lived, one must wonder how it is they possess so much verisimilitude and why they talk so much about people we know lived and about so
many things we know happened.” – Craig Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2012) 9-10

vii. Archaeology helps show us that the Gospels talk about people and places that really existed.

### III. OTHER ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY CORROBORATES GOSPEL DETAILS.

A. Other NT Epistles corroborate important Gospel details (see examples above).

B. Moreover, early Christian works outside of the NT, like the *Didache*, 1 Clement, and Ignatius, confirm Gospel details.

### IV. ANCIENT NON-CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY CORROBORATES OTHER PEOPLE, EVENTS, AND A THUMBNAIL PORTRAIT OF JESUS WITH THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS.

A. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus mentions:
   
   i. Caiaphas the high priest
   
   ii. Annas the high priest

   iii. Pontius Pilate
   
   iv. King Herod and his descendants

   v. John the Baptist being killed by Herod

   vi. James the “brother of Jesus”

   vii. And even summarizes the life of Jesus in the often cited “Testimonium Flavianum” (Testimony of Flavius Josephus), which reads: “At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one should call him a man*. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. *He was the Messiah*. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. *For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous

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13 *Antiquities*, Book 18, ch.2
16 *Antiquities*, Book 18, ch. 5, par. 2
18 *Antiquities*, Book 20, ch. 9.
things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.\textsuperscript{19}

viii. Most scholars think the italicized phrases above are later insertions made by Christians, but when we remove those disputed parts, the flow of thought is still very clear: “At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.”

ix. John Meier offers five reasons why we should accept this revised version (taking out only the disputed parts) as authentically coming from Josephus:\textsuperscript{20}

a) The Testimonium itself appears in all Greek manuscripts (although this point needs to be tempered because there are not a whole lot of manuscripts).

b) Not mentioning Jesus at all would confuse a later reference in this same work when Josephus identifies James as “the brother of Jesus.” Saying that James is the “brother of Jesus” wouldn’t help readers identify James if Josephus hadn’t already told his readers who Jesus was.\textsuperscript{21}

c) The passage follows Josephus’ style. The style of writing is very much like Josephus writes and not like the Christian writings of the NT. (Surely it would be farfetched to say that an early Christian went to the trouble to learn Josephus’ style and vocabulary to mimic it, only to then throw all of that away by putting in the obviously Christian sounding insertions!)


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, Meier, 64-9.

\textsuperscript{21} “Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others.” (Josephus, Antiquities, Book 20, ch. 9. Emphasis added)
d) The Christology of the revised passage is very low and fitting for a Jewish person to write.
e) Simplicity—no major re-writing of the text is needed; just bracket off the Christian statements.
f) Meier’s arguments are enough to put the burden of proof on those who deny that the Testimonium comes from Josephus.

V. THE LACK OF ANY CHRISTIAN OUTCRY OR COUNTER CLAIM SUGGESTS HISTORICAL ACCURACY.
   A. There were plenty of people ready, willing, and able to correct any false Christian claims about Jesus (Mk and Q were certainly put together early enough for this).
   B. There is no early record of any such counter claims.

Did the Gospel writers ever make mistakes? Sure, it’s possible from a historical perspective..., but one is pressed to find clear instances of a mistake.

Dealing With Discrepancies and Alleged Contradictions
I. DID THE GOSPEL WRITERS EVER MAKE MISTAKES? Sure, it’s possible from a historical perspective (putting aside the theological doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy), but one is pressed to find clear instances of a mistake.

II. HISTORICAL ERRORS? Take a famous “mistake” like the Quirinius example:
   A. Luke says Quirinius was the “governor” of Syria when Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem to register in a census.
   B. But other Roman and Jewish historians say Quirinius was governor of Syria about six years later than that.
   C. Did Luke make a historical error?
   D. Even if he did make a mistake, he got it “close,” which indicates he was intending to get it right here, presumably to the best of his ability (remember the all or nothing fallacy).
   E. But we can’t say for sure that Luke was wrong. The Greek word Luke uses for “governor” is a looser term that stands for “to rule or lead.”
F. It is very possible that Quirinius was some kind of “ruler” or “leader” at that time (we know, for example, he was leading military expeditions in that area at the time Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem).

G. So Quirinius could have been some kind of “governor” before he became the formal “Governor” later on.

H. We can’t prove Luke was right, but there is simply not enough evidence to prove he was wrong either.

I. Also, these other sources reporting on Quirinius are sometimes inconsistent—maybe they got some of their facts wrong.

J. Other alleged errors and “contradictions” have similar plausible resolutions; these apparent discrepancies have been widely known and discussed since the beginning of Christianity.

“Though it’s common in many scholarly circles to speak of ‘contradictions’ as ‘the assured results of scholarship,’ in fact many if not all of the so-called ‘contradictions’ in the Bible have been carefully analyzed and interpreted by scholars who have then concluded that true contradictions don’t exist….

III. “HARMONIZATION” – explaining the apparent discrepancies in such a way to show there is no contradiction

IV. “Though it’s common in many scholarly circles to speak of ‘contradictions’ as ‘the assured results of scholarship,’ in fact many if not all of the so-called ‘contradictions’ in the Bible have been carefully analyzed and interpreted by scholars who have then concluded that true contradictions don’t exist. Many of the apparent contradictions turn out to depend on superficial or rigid readings of the text.” (Mark Roberts, Can We Trust The Gospels?, 108).

V. OTHER TYPES OF DISCREPANCIES: Example of Jairus’ daughter
(Compare Mark 5:21 to the parallel story in Mt 9:18, and there is an apparent discrepancy)

A. “Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name; and seeing him, he fell at his feet, and besought him, saying, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.’ And he went with him…” (Mark 5:21–24). While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler’s house some who said, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?” (Mark 5:35)
B. “While he was thus speaking to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, ‘My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.’” (Mt 9:18)

C. MARK (AND LUKE) SAYS THE GIRL HAD NOT YET DIED WHEN JAIRUS FIRST TALKED TO JESUS, BUT MATTHEW SAYS THE GIRL IS ALREADY DEAD! WHICH IS IT?

D. Response: Matthew, as he usually does, shortens the whole incident. He sums up all of the thoughts of the father and puts them in one sentence and has Jairus say that. St. Augustine was aware of this problem and said as much: ‘It is in the interests of brevity that Mt makes Jairus ask the Lord to do what in fact he did…. The two (Mk and Lk) give what Jairus actually said, Matthew what he wished and thought…. From examples of this kind we deduce a most useful and absolutely indispensable principle (of interpretation), viz…. that (a writer) does not lie if he makes a person say what that person wishes rather than what he actually said.’ (St. Augustine, The Harmony of the Gospels, 2, 28, 66)

E. The ancient Palestinian style of retelling history: There are a lot of “inconsistencies” like this in the Gospels, and the reason is that the differences reflect the personal interpretation, editing, and paraphrasing of the Gospel author without calling into question the historicity of the actual event.

   i. Paraphrasing is very common in the Gospels.
      a) Blomberg points out that Hebrew and Greek do not have nor did they need quotation marks; it was acceptable to say someone said something without using their exact words—as long as you were faithful to the meaning.
      b) Jesus’ teachings have been paraphrased all throughout the Gospels.
      c) Such “approximations” were considered acceptable.

   ii. Clarifying
      a) Sometimes a Gospel writer will add words for clarification; for example, Matthew adds the words “in spirit” to “blessed are the poor” (Mt 5:3).

   iii. Omitting
      a) Sometimes the Gospel writers omit things—for whatever reason.
      b) Sometimes a writer would compress or stretch out a narrative. (Matthew tends to be brief and say things in fewer words.)
iv. Not trying to put everything in chronological order
   a) Not all events are presented in the same order.
   b) Augustine recognized that the events were arranged
      according to a theme and not according to strict
      chronology.

F. By ancient standards (and really by the standards of popular speech
   today), all of this was completely acceptable.
   i. We still say things like “the sun rises”—it would be bizarre
      for someone to come and tell me I’ve just uttered an error in
      cosmology when I say that.

G. The Gospels DO REWORD AND REARRANGE THE EVENTS—
   but that doesn’t make them fictional.

H. There are a lot of these kinds of examples. Most are very trivial. 22

I. So these are all apparent discrepancies—not genuine ones.

VI. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE “GIST” AND THE CORE STORY

A. THE ESSENTIAL CORE IS WHERE WE CAN AFFIRM THE
   HISTORICAL RELIABILITY WITH THE GREATEST AMOUNT
   OF CONFIDENCE.

B. We can know what happened at the scene of an accident even if
   some of the witnesses’ details are “fuzzy.”

C. We can say something is historical while still seeing the variety—
   the “gist” has been faithfully preserved. Even in spite of the
   variation in the details, it is still evident that the core event still
   really happened.

D. THE “GIST” THE CORE STORY, THE BROADER OUTLINE,
   MINUS THE SMALL VARIANCES—THIS IS WHERE
   HISTORICAL CERTAINTY LIES.

E. Common experience tells us that general impressions are normally
   more trustworthy than details anyway.

F. Memory often gets the broad gist right rather than the fine details
   anyway.

G. Each account may have some variations of details, but the core
   story is the same. For example:
   i. That Jesus established a Last Supper vs. the exact words of
      institution of the Last Supper
   ii. The tomb was found empty—how many women were there

22 See Blomberg, 113–152.
and which women were there? There is simply not enough information to say.

H. THE SIMILARITIES IN THE CORE STORY ARE FAR MORE STRIKING, NUMEROUS, AND IMPORTANT THAN THE DIFFERENCES.

I. The minor variations that exist alongside the great amount of agreement strengthen their trustworthiness. IT IS JUST WHAT WE WOULD EXPECT FROM SEVERAL EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS. Verbatim repetition would look like just one writer copying the other.

J. So it’s hard to find a clear example of historical error—but we do find NUMEROUS CLEAR EXAMPLES OF HISTORICAL ACCURACY.

K. EVEN IF THERE WERE SOME ERRORS HERE AND THERE, THAT REALLY DOES NOTHING TO TARNISH THEIR GENERAL RELIABILITY.

L. Just like a generally reliable person that you know can still make mistakes sometimes, that doesn’t mean you stop regarding them as reliable.

What Does All of This Mean?

I. ALL OF THIS GIVES US A VERY FAVORABLE IMPRESSION OF THE RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS.

   A. First, it should be taken as historically established that the NT we have today is an accurate representation of what was originally written (given textual criticism).

   B. Secondly, all of the available evidence says that the Gospel writers were ABLE to write accurate history, they were INTENDING to write accurate history, and they in fact DID write accurate history in the areas that we can check up on.

II. No evidence at all suggests that this stuff was just made up. ALL THE EVIDENCE SAYS OTHERWISE.

III. Important point to remember: The standard is in comparison to other historical writings.

IV. Forming the General Presumption: Since the Gospels do report truth where they can be checked up on, the Gospels earn the benefit of the doubt in the areas in which they cannot be corroborated.

V. The burden of proof, at that point, is on those who assert they are unhistorical.
Summary of This Chapter

I. WE COVERED A LOT OF MATERIAL IN THIS CHAPTER. LET’S BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE THINGS. In this section, we prefaced our discussion with the importance of history for Christianity and the Gospel crisis today, and then we covered two important areas for Christian apologetics:

II. PROPER HISTORICAL METHOD:

A. It’s important to keep in mind that it is impossible to corroborate every detail of an ancient text. Since one cannot possibly corroborate everything, the best we can do is establish a general reliability.

B. Hence the best historical procedure is to begin with an open mind and attempt to form a general presumption about the trustworthiness of a document using evidence and historiographical criteria.

C. If the things we can check out are factual, the document should earn the benefit of the doubt on the things one cannot check up on. If general reliability is established, the assumption at that point is that the whole is factual unless there is good reason to think otherwise.

D. Once established as a generally reliable document, a historically favorable presumption prevails, and the burden of proof falls on deniers at that point. The burden of proof is on those who assert they are unhistorical.

III. DEFENSE OF THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS – We then used this method to show two main points:

A. That the Gospels we have today are accurate representations of the originals

B. That the originals themselves should be regarded as historically reliable given the “A.I.D” argument—all the evidence suggests the Gospel writers were able, intending, and actually did write accurate history.

This is all one can reasonably expect from history, and this is the situation we have with the Gospels.
How to Respond to Common Objections

I. “THE GOSPELS ARE JUST MADE UP MYTHS AND STORIES.”

A. Actually, all the evidence indicates just the opposite. The evidence strongly suggests that the writers were *able*, *intending*, and *did* write accurate history, not just stories and myths, as you say. In fact, there is no credible evidence at all to suggest these were just made up “stories.” So given the evidence, the burden of proof falls on you to back up your criticism. It’s not enough to just assert a claim like this; you need to back it up with historical evidence.

B. You should also know that no reputable scholar holds this view today. Even the historiographical criteria alone are enough to show that these works are not just made up stories. If you don’t get that, then you simply don’t understand the criteria!

II. “THERE ARE CONTRADICTIONS IN THE GOSPELS. THEREFORE THEY CAN’T BE TAKEN AS RELIABLE.”

A. First of all, this is the “all or nothing fallacy,” and no credible historian would make such a dramatic claim. No historian would
ever throw out a whole source just because it contained some errors. Even if it were true that there were discrepancies in some places, that does nothing to show that the core story is false or unreliable.

B. For example, did you know that some witnesses of the Titanic disaster said the ship broke in half and others said it stayed intact? It would be crazy to discount everybody’s testimony because of this discrepancy! We do know that their core story was correct even if some details were contradictory.

C. In fact, all of these apparent inconsistencies have been known since the beginning of Christianity and have been given plausible resolutions.

D. Finally, many notable Christians, like St. John Chrysostom for example, have argued that it is precisely the presence of these minor inconsistencies that lend credibility to the Gospels! The appearance of inconsistencies is what we would expect from several real eyewitness accounts. Too much consistency would look contrived!

To object that history doesn’t provide absolute certainty commits the “all or nothing” fallacy. Just because we can’t have absolute certainty doesn’t mean we can’t have adequate certainty.

III. “WE CAN’T SAY ANYTHING FOR SURE BECAUSE WE DON’T HAVE ALL THE FACTS.”

A. This is another example of the “all or nothing” fallacy. No credible historian does or even could hold such an outrageously strict standard. We never have “all the facts” about any historical event nor do we need to. We don’t have “all the facts” about Julius Caesar, Napoleon, or anyone else. Yet our knowledge of history can be adequate even if not perfect. Incomplete does not mean inaccurate!

B. We don’t know everything, but we have deal with the facts we do have.

IV. “WE CAN’T BE ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN ABOUT THE PAST. HISTORY IS NOT AN EXACT SCIENCE.”

A. So what? Do you bring that up when you talk about Julius Caesar or Napoleon?

B. To object that history doesn’t provide absolute certainty commits the “all or nothing” fallacy. Just because we can’t have absolute certainty doesn’t mean we can’t have adequate certainty.
C. Do you buy a house, take a new job, or decide to get married based on absolute certitude? Of course not. We can't be absolutely certain about a lot of important things, and history is no exception.

D. History doesn't claim to provide absolute certitude, but it can give us facts knowable beyond a reasonable doubt.

V. “THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN DECADES AFTER THE ACTUAL EVENTS, ALL BASED ON WHAT OTHER PEOPLE SAID HAPPENED. THAT’S ABOUT AS RELIABLE AS THE KID’S GAME OF TELEPHONE.”

A. It probably wouldn't be very much fun playing telephone with people in ancient Palestine because people from ancient cultures were amazingly good at memorization. So the analogy between our memory skills and theirs isn’t a good one.

B. You should also know that it is pretty likely that at least some of his disciples made use of handwritten notes.

C. Besides, in telephone, the participants are left alone to do the best they can. But in early Christianity, the apostolic leadership was still available to “check up” on any errors and correct them. So the Gospel tradition had “checks and balances” in it that don’t exist in a game of telephone!

VI. “WE DON’T HAVE DIRECT ACCESS TO THE PAST.”

A. So what? Scientists don’t always have direct access either! Scientists sometimes refer only to notes, an astronomer looking at a distant galaxy doesn't have direct access to his subject, physicists don't always have direct access to what they are studying, and evolutionary biologists don't have direct access to what they are studying either.

B. Historical knowledge is, by its very nature, an indirect type of knowledge. It is knowledge based on testimony. How much of what you know comes not from direct access but from the reliable testimony of others?

VII. “THE GOSPEL AUTHORS WERE BIASED AND CAN’T BE TRUSTED.”

A. This objection commits the “genetic fallacy” by discrediting a view as false based on the motivations of the people who hold it. No credible historian could discredit a view based on the fact that its authors cared about their topic. That would mean we would have to throw out all ancient historical sources!

B. Everybody has biases. Surely you would agree that sports fans can give accurate reports even on games involving their favorite teams or that the Jewish witnesses to the Holocaust can still relate true facts about it even though they were emotionally “biased” about
that event in the sense that they had very strong feelings about it. A rape victim can be “biased” in the sense that she strongly cares about the truth and wants justice to be served. But none of this necessarily means their testimony is unreliable.

C. Ultimately, this objection is not only fallacious, but it is also just an assertion without any supporting evidence. All the evidence suggests that the Gospel authors were able, intending, and did write reliable history. If you think their biases got in the way of telling the truth, you need to shoulder the burden of proof and provide historical evidence that shows that.

What you decide on the Gospels can affect how you live your daily life.

VIII. “YOU CAN’T TRUST ANCIENT TEXTS.”

A. Really? How about the Roman Empire? Do you believe it existed? Should we abolish all studies of ancient history?

IX. “THERE ISN’T UNIVERSAL CONSENSUS AMONGST SCHOLARS.”

A. There isn’t a universal consensus of scholars on a lot of things. There isn’t a universal consensus about Darwinian evolution, or Big Bang cosmology, or a whole host of other things. You can almost always find scholars in any field that disagree.

B. A lot is on the line with the Gospels. It is not just an abstract academic issue. What you decide on the Gospels can affect how you live your daily life. Since we don’t have universal consensus in other less threatening areas, we shouldn’t expect it here either.

C. What we do have are good reasons to think the Gospels give us reliable history.

X. “ANY WRITER WHO BELIEVES IN MIRACLES IS NOT A RELIABLE SOURCE OF HISTORY.”

A. Well, if that were true, then you would have to rule out ALL of ancient history then because nearly all ancient historians believed in supernatural events. The Gospels are no different in this regard.

B. Besides, what if God exists and a miracle really happened? Your objection actually commits the fallacy of “begging the question” by assuming miracles never happen and using that assumption to discredit any reports that a miracle did happen. You need to give some good reasons on why you think miracles are impossible, not just assert that statement without support.
Chapter Questions

1. Explain in your own words why Christians cannot be indifferent to history.

2. What are some of the problems that scholars in the Jesus Seminar raise against traditional Christianity? What are some of the problems of their methods?

3. Describe the nature of historical knowledge and the level of certitude we can have about it. Why?

4. What should we presume about the historical trustworthiness of a document and why?

5. Describe the three main criteria of historical authenticity and how they help us to discover historical truth.

6. What is an “inference to the best explanation” and how is it achieved?

7. What are the three main sources for the historical Jesus? Are the NT epistles important and if so, why?
8. How do we know that the NT we have today is an accurate representation of the original works?

9. Why should we think the Gospel writers were able to write accurate history?

10. Why should we think the Gospels writers intended to write accurate history?

11. What good reasons are there for thinking the Gospel writers did write accurate history?

12. According to many NT scholars today, the time gap between the events of Jesus’ life and the writing of the Gospels was about 35-65 years. Is this a problem for historical reliability?

13. There are discrepancies amongst the Gospels when they are referring to the same event. Does this mean they are wrong in what they report? Explain your answer.