

CAN I TRUST THE FOUR GOSPELS?

The majority of information about Christ's life is found in four documents: the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If we are to believe Jesus is who he said he was, we must first determine the historical trustworthiness of these four documents. Because the gospels are ancient documents, historians often employ three tests to determine reliability (this would be true of any ancient document):

1. Bibliographical/manuscript test: How many manuscript copies do we have today and how far removed are they from the original documents?
2. External test: How do the documents square or align themselves with facts, dates, and persons from other contemporary documents or archaeology?
3. Internal test: What do the documents claim for themselves? Are they internally coherent? Are there any contradictions? What is the character of the authors?

Using these tests, we find that the gospel accounts are reliable as historical, factual documents and one can believe that what they say about Christ is true.

1. Bibliographical test.

Perhaps the most tangible method for evaluating the manuscript evidence is a comparison of the New Testament to other historical documents from the same time period (see article on Manuscript Evidence). One example is The Annals written by Tacitus in A.D. 100; the earliest manuscript is dated A.D. 1100 and a total of 20 copies have been found. One thousand years separate the original document and the oldest manuscripts of this important Roman work, yet historians commonly accept it as reliable. On the other hand, over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of entire books and fragments of the New Testament have been found.

One complete copy of the New Testament (Codex Sinaiticus) is only 300 years removed from the originals, and a fragment of John (Rylands Papyrus: P52) found in Egypt has been dated to only 40 years removed from the original. When compared to any other ancient document, the manuscript evidence for the New Testament presents an overwhelming case for reliability.

2. External test.

Three external areas of evidence may be briefly mentioned. First, the dates, geography, and description of first century Palestine in the gospels square well with what is known from other ancient documents. Second,

archaeology continues to confirm the gospel accounts as well, such as the excavation of the synagogue in Capernaum, Jacob's well at Sychar, the pool of Bethesda with its five porticos in Jerusalem, and the pool of Siloam, also in Jerusalem. Third, numerous extra-Biblical sources, such as Tacitus, Seutonius, the Jewish Talmud, and Josephus, witness to the person of Christ and basic characteristics of his life. In short, the external evidence corroborates the historicity of the gospels and provides another compelling basis for their reliability.

3. Internal test.

Finally, the internal evidence for the trustworthiness of the gospel accounts is abundant. While numerous similarities between the gospels suggest related source material, they also debunk the theory that four different individuals fabricated their works separately. At the same time, the differences and apparent contradictions between the gospels discredit the theory of collective fabrication, as well as enhance their authenticity. While the apparent contradictions have puzzled many, a greater understanding of first century writing standards provides adequate explanations in most cases. The result is that the most reasonable explanation is that the gospels represent four different historical accounts of the life of Christ. The introduction to the book of Luke summarizes the gospel-writers' intentions well:

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”
(Luke 1:1-4, TNIV)

Robust evidence exists from church tradition and literary style that the authors of the gospels were the apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. With this in mind, the authors' lack of fame and wealth, and their subsequent persecution and martyrdom are strong indications that these men were not lying, deceiving, or fabricating false testimony. Additionally, the presence of living eyewitnesses to the gospel events at the time the manuscripts were circulated would have provided the opportunity for discrediting the gospels, if they were untrue. Ultimately, when taken together, the bibliographical, external, and internal evidence for the gospels are more than sufficient to establish their credibility as historically factual.