

**THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS:  
MY LATEST THINKING ON THE TOPIC THAT WON'T GO AWAY**

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Introduction

Twelve Historical Reasons for Supporting the General Reliability of the Gospels, especially the Synoptics

1. We have highly reliable copies of the texts of what Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote.  
Over 5400 ancient Greek manuscripts and we may be just a few copies removed from the autographs.

Less than 1% of New Testament is textually uncertain to any significant degree

No doctrine or practice of Christianity depends solely on a disputed text

2. The authors were in a position to report accurate historical information.  
Whether or not, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John correct ascriptions

But in fact a good case can be made that they are

3. All four gospels were written during the first century of Christianity.  
Typical more conservative dates: Matthew, Mark, Luke in 60s; John in 90s

Typical less conservative dates: Mark in 70s; Matthew and Luke in 80s; John in 90s

Either way, remarkably short period of time after Jesus' death in A.D. 30 by ancient standards

4. The gospel writers would have wanted to preserve accurate history.  
Despite possibilities regarding the end of the world

Despite theological overlay; indeed precisely because of the specific theological claims

5. Ancient cultures meticulously cultivated the art of memorization.  
Jewish, Greco-Roman schoolboys learned by rote memory

Rabbis often had large portions of Hebrew Scriptures memorized

A Gospel was quite literally "child's play"

6. The differences among the gospels closely match the patterns of ancient storytelling.  
The received scholarly wisdom of Markan priority and a Q-hypothesis remains probable

But studies in ancient folkloristics suggest significant influence from oral tradition as well  
"Flexible transmission with fixed limits" and influence of "social memory"

Completely *contra* Bart Ehrman's appeal to the child's game of telephone

7. The literary genre of the gospels most resembles that of the other more trustworthy histories and biographies from the ancient world (esp. Josephus, Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius).

See esp. Luke 1:1-4

Key is to assess quality of history by standards of their day not, anachronistically, by ours.

8. The presence of the "hard sayings" of Jesus supports the Gospels' historicity (e.g., Luke 14:26, Mark 13:32).
9. The "missing topics" Jesus does not address also support historical reliability (e.g., circumcision, speaking in tongues).
10. The testimony of non-Christian writers confirms the general contours of Christ's life (see Josephus, Talmud, Thallus, Lucian, Mara ben Serapion, Suetonius, Tacitus, Pliny).
11. Archaeology has confirmed even more circumstantial details in the Gospels.
12. The testimony of other early Christian writers supports many remaining details (esp. what predates written form of Gospels, esp. in Paul and [probably] James).

Numerous quotations or allusions to Jesus' sayings

High Christology in early creeds/confessions of faith/hymns, including to resurrection in 1 Cor. 15

### Conclusions

Three different approaches to the relationship between historical evidence and faith like three possible approaches to a long jump.

Best is to see evidence propelling us in direction of faith but there still must be a step.

### For Further Reading

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