



St Helen's  
Bishopsgate

BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES

# Can we trust the Bible?



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## Introduction

There can be little doubt that if the things that the New Testament says about Jesus are true, then he *is* the most important man ever to walk the face of this earth, and our response to him is of staggering importance.

Consider for a moment what the Gospel writers tell us about the claims of Jesus. They tell us that he claimed to be the very manifestation of God on earth. When Jesus made that claim, he wasn't just talking about some little, temporal, tribal deity with a small 'g', he was talking about the big 'G' God of Old Testament Judaism, Yahweh. The Jews believed that the God they worshipped was the sole Creator of the entire universe – in fact, they believed that their God had made the whole world just by speaking, such was his awesome power. Every tree, every star, every mountain, every moon, every microbe, every person – all of them, Jews believed, owe their existence to God. More than that, Jews didn't just believe that their God was the Creator of everything that is, seen and unseen, they also believed that he is the Controller of all things. Jews were never Fatalists (they knew that human beings are morally responsible agents who can rightly be held to account for our decisions), but they did believe that times and seasons, world history, the natural order – all of them – lay under the ultimate control of God. They believed that God is the one, ultimately, who grows food in the ground for us to eat, who puts oxygen in the air for us to breathe and who puts people in our lives to make us love and laugh. In other words, the Jews had a pretty big idea of God – that he is the Creator and Controller of all things. And then Jesus, a Jew, came along and claimed to be the very manifestation of *that* God in human form.

There was an occasion when one of his disciples, Philip, was finding it all a bit much, and he said to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father [show us God], and that will be enough for us.' And in reply, Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me *has* seen the Father' (John 14.8-10). Some people say that Jesus never actually claimed to be God, but there it is, bold as brass, in the pages of the New Testament. Jesus said, 'If you have seen me, you have seen God.' Elsewhere he claimed full access to the mind of God and said, in as many words, 'If you have heard me speak, you have heard God speak.' If someone knew Jesus, if someone met Jesus, he believed that they had met God, that they knew God – the Creator and Controller of all things. His claims were staggering.

But, you may be thinking, anyone can claim to be God, and you're right. Indeed, mental hospitals up and down the country are full of people who think that they are the manifestation of God, but Christians don't worship them. That's because their conduct is unable to back up their claims. Jesus was different.

In Mark's Gospel alone Jesus heals a whole crowd of sick people (1.32-34), cleanses a leper (1.40-45), heals a paralytic (2.1-12), cures a man with a withered hand (3.1-6), calms the wind and waves with a single command (4.35-41), heals a demon-possessed man (5.1-13), restores a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (5.23-34), raises a dead girl back to life (5.35-43), feeds five thousand men (plus their families) with just five loaves of bread and two fish (6.30-44), walks on water (6.45-51), heals another crowd (6.53-56), heals a man who was deaf and mute (7.31-37), feeds a different crowd of four thousand people – this time from seven loaves of bread and a few small fish (8.1-10), restores the sight of a blind man (8.22-26), and heals another boy whose life was being tormented by an evil spirit (9.14-29), before healing one last blind man (10.46-52). To cap it all, three days after his brutal murder, Jesus himself rose from the dead (16.1-8).

It is no wonder that when people saw the things that Jesus was doing, they said, 'We never saw anything like this.' (Mark 2.12). Many believed his claim to be God and fell on their knees to worship him. If everything that the Gospels record is true, it's not hard to see why. More than that, it's not hard to see why Christians say that we should do the same – even though we are alive 2000 years later. If Jesus really did do everything that the New Testament says, we can be confident that the Christian faith is entirely and objectively true – not just for those who choose to believe it, but for everyone; in other words, Jesus really is my God and your God – we will meet him as our judge when we die and the only sensible thing to do is to begin to worship him today, before it is too late.

Many thoughtful inquirers recognise the enormous implications of Jesus' claims. That is why so many want a clear answer to the question, 'But is it true? Can we really trust what the Bible says? Or is being a Christian today really no more than a leap of blind faith?'

The ambitious aim of this booklet is to answer that question. Two issues need to be resolved. First, can we trust that the authors of the Gospels wrote accurate history? Second, can we trust that the Bible has been accurately preserved? We will consider each question in turn.

## **A: Can we trust that the authors of the Gospels wrote accurate history?**

### **a) The accusation: they did not.**

Many people in the contemporary world presume that the four Gospels in the New Testament are basically unreliable sources of historical information about Jesus Christ. They are encouraged in their scepticism by the writings of some scholars who argue that the Jesus of the New Testament is not the 'real Jesus of history' but a 'Christ of faith' – only if we get behind the *blinded-by-faith* writings of the New Testament will we encounter Jesus as he *really* was. Dan Brown and his readers believe something similar. They contend that the early church deliberately suppressed and eliminated some of Jesus' teaching from the official records because it did not fit in with their patriarchal and authoritarian agenda. If we want to find the real Jesus today, therefore, we are not to turn to the New Testament. We are to turn instead to the non-canonical documents, like the Gnostic Gospels (and Dan Brown's books!).

The challenge against the historical integrity of the New Testament writings is summarised by Richard Dawkins in the following quotations:

'The fact that something is written down is persuasive to people not used to asking questions like: 'Who wrote it, and when?' 'How did they know what to write?' 'Did they, in their time, really mean what we, in our time, understand them to be saying?' 'Were they unbiased observers, or did they have an agenda that coloured their writing?' Ever since the nineteenth century, scholarly theologians have made an overwhelming case that the Gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world. All were written long after the death of Jesus, and also after the epistles of Paul, which mention almost none of the alleged facts of Jesus' life.'

'Nobody knows who the four evangelists were, but they almost certainly never met Jesus personally. Much of what they wrote was in no sense an honest attempt at history... it is even possible to mount a serious, though not widely supported, historical case that Jesus never lived at all.'

'Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the New Testament (and obviously not the Old Testament) as a reliable record of what actually happened in history, and I shall not consider the Bible further as evidence for any kind of deity.'

All taken from Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pages 92-97

The benefit of Richard Dawkins' polemical style is that it reminds us again of the significance of our investigation. If the sceptics' case can be demonstrated, Christianity is entirely false and should be rejected by all. But if the sceptics' case can be over-turned, Christianity is entirely true and should be accepted by all.

### **b) The counter-evidence of the New Testament itself:**

In response to the above challenge, the first thing that we need to say is that the New Testament itself very self-consciously asserts that it is in fact historically accurate.

## Some of the information in the Gospels came from eyewitnesses:

Consider these words from the Apostle John (the author of the fourth Gospel and three New Testament letters). In this extract he is talking about the source of the material that he proclaims about Jesus:

<sup>1</sup> That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - <sup>2</sup> the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - <sup>3</sup> that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

*1 John chapter 1, verses 1-3*

In her book, 'A History of God', Karen Armstrong argues that the New Testament is made up of a combination of reality and fantasy. She believes that as the years went by an initial kernel of historical reality was overlaid by myth and fantasy to such an extent that the New Testament cannot now be trusted to teach us accurately about Jesus. All of which makes it sound as though the earliest Christians did not mind much whether the things that they were teaching were historically accurate.

The passage above demonstrates that the Apostle John would have disagreed vehemently. He insists that the Jesus he preached about was *exactly the same* as the Jesus that he had personally encountered in history. Probably speaking about his encounters with Jesus after his resurrection from the dead, John says, 'We preach the Jesus that we ourselves heard preaching; we proclaim the Jesus that we ourselves saw; we encourage others to believe in the Jesus that we ourselves touched.' In John's mind at least, there was no divide between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the New Testament – they were one and the same.

It is worth pointing out how high the stakes were in John's mind on this matter. He wanted his readers to have 'fellowship with God the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.' He believed that the only way for them to have that kind of fellowship with God was if they believed in Jesus. Elsewhere he wrote, 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' (John 3.16). If people did not believe in Jesus as he really was (the Jesus that God had sent into the world), they would miss out on fellowship with God himself; indeed, they would perish. That is why John was so determined to proclaim accurate history to people – he believed that their eternal destiny was on the line.

The claim, then, is that some of the information in the Gospels came from eyewitnesses. Further support for this claim comes when we realise that the eyewitness testimony of the Gospels did not just *emerge from*, but was also *verified by* the eyewitness community. That is, the historical truth claims of the New Testament were accepted by the very people who had witnessed the events that are described. This is important. Some people seem to have the impression that the earliest preachers arrived in Jerusalem and proclaimed entirely new information about Jesus to its inhabitants. The impression continues that the poor, naïve inhabitants of Jerusalem had no opportunity to test anything that was being preached to them but believed it anyway, and so the church was born. Nothing could be further from the truth. The New Testament records a sermon given by the Apostle Peter in Jerusalem that was delivered just six weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the sermon Peter makes explicit appeal to what his hearers *already know* about Jesus. He said, 'Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested *to you* by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him *in your midst, as you yourselves know* – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, *you* crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it' (Acts 2.22-24).

Peter's hearers had every opportunity to challenge the truth of what he was saying. They might have replied, 'But who are you? You weren't there! It didn't happen like that; there were no miracles at all; he wasn't really raised from the dead; it happened like this...' Instead, confronted afresh with the reality of the Jesus that they had seen, and whom they had killed, 'they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles,

'Brothers, what shall we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.' By the end of the day, 3000 of the crowd had joined the church for the first time (Acts 2.37-38, 41). They did so because they knew that Jesus had been raised from the dead, just as Peter said.

So, the New Testament itself claims that some of the information in the Gospels emerged from and was verified by the eyewitness community. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the recent findings of some modern scholars support rather than contradict this claim. One such scholar is Richard Bauckham who recently published a lengthy tome entitled, 'Jesus and the Eyewitnesses' (and a much shorter summary, 'The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony') in which he argues that a careful reading of the Gospels reveals them to be made up of 'eyewitness testimony' about Jesus.

One argument that he advances arises from the use of personal names in the Gospels. He demonstrates that we now know the personal names of about 3000 individuals from around the time of the New Testament. He says, 'From our data we can estimate quite accurately the relative popularity of the various names in use. If we calculate the same data for the personal names in the Gospels and Acts, there is a close correlation. This would not be the case if names in the Gospels were random inventions added to the Gospel traditions.' (Richard Bauckham, 'The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony' (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008, p9).

Further, Bauckham points out that the Gospels record the names of a surprising number of minor characters. We would expect major public figures like Pontius Pilate, and significant Christian figures like the Apostles to be named, but the Gospels also record the names of lots of very minor characters (Jairus, Bartimaeus, Alexander and Rufus in Mark; Cleopas, Zacchaeus and Simon in Luke etc.). Bauckham argues that the only plausible explanation of this observation is that 'In most of these cases the named persons became members of the early Christian communities and themselves told the stories in which they appear in the Gospels.' (Richard Bauckham, 'The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony' (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008, p10). It is as if the Gospel writers are inviting their readers to go and talk to the individuals themselves to verify the reality of the stories told about them.

It seems then, that careful scholarship (of the very kind that Richard Dawkins encouraged) does not refute but rather vindicates the New Testament's own claim that some of the information contained in the Gospels came from eyewitnesses. What of the rest of the material in the Gospels?

### **The rest of the information came from those who had personal access to eyewitness evidence:**

Not all of the writers of the New Testament were themselves eyewitnesses of the things that Jesus said and did. One such writer was Luke – who wrote both a Gospel and the Book of Acts. He does claim, however, in the opening paragraph of his Gospel that he did have personal access to eyewitness evidence:

<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

*The Gospel of Luke chapter 1, verses 1-4*

Of course, there is nothing to stop me going away today, researching a particular period of history, gathering many accurate historical facts and then writing an entirely fictional account which contains a smattering of accurate historical information. Some people think that the Gospels are a similar example of 'realistic fiction'. One problem with that theory is that the literary genre of 'realistic fiction' was not invented for another 1600 years or so after the writing of the New Testament. CS Lewis, a world-class literary critic, made this comment about the Gospels:

‘I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this. Of this [Gospel] text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage... or else, some unknown [ancient] writer... without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative...’<sup>1</sup>

To believe that the New Testament is a work of fiction, someone would need to believe a surprisingly complex sequence of facts: i) the disciples of Jesus invented a new genre of writing; ii) fellow eyewitnesses were duped into believing myth about Jesus; or iii) they were willing to die for something that they *knew* to be a children’s story; and iv) the genre of ‘realistic fiction’ was then lost to the world for another 1600 years. It does not seem very likely.

Rather, Luke claims to be writing an *orderly* account that yields absolute *certainty* of conviction. He says:

- lots of other people have undertaken to write up the facts about Jesus
- I have followed all these closely for a while
- I want you to have certainty about what you were taught
- and I have written my Gospel to give it to you.

Can we believe him? Well, it is, of course, impossible to test the historical reliability of everything that Luke wrote (e.g. the content of private conversations). However, recent investigations into Luke’s descriptions of settings, customs, and locales have revealed that in those matters which we can verify independently, Luke was a ‘first-class ancient historian’ (Darrell Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994, p13).

## Summary

The New Testament explicitly refutes the claim that it is ‘mere myth’. Some of the writers of the New Testament were themselves eyewitnesses of the events that they are describing. These writers place great stall by their claim to be proclaiming the things that actually happened. The rest of the writers of the New Testament had direct and personal access to eyewitness evidence. They too claim to be passing on accurate historical information to us.

To which the question often comes, ‘But what about non-Christian historical sources? What if we put the Bible to one side? How much do the Roman and Jewish writings of the time tell us about Jesus?’ The methodology is ill-advised (what good historical reason is there for putting the Bible to one side?), but the answer is compelling nonetheless.

## c) The evidence of the New Testament is confirmed by non-Christian historians:

To save space, I will quote only a *few* of the most important Roman and Jewish historical texts in this section, before listing *everything* that we learn about Jesus from non-Christian historians:

### i) The evidence of Roman history:

‘Christians derived their name from a man called Christ, who, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate. The deadly superstition, thus checked for a moment, broke out afresh not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but also in the City of Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular.’

Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56-120), *Annals*, Book 15.44

‘The sum total of their guilt or error was no more than the following. They had met regularly before dawn on a determined day, and sung antiphonally a hymn to Christ *as to a god*. They also took an oath not for any crime, but to keep from theft, robbery and adultery, and not to break any promise.’

Pliny the Younger (AD 61-113), *Book 10, letter 96*

<sup>1</sup> C S Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, Walter Hooper, ed. (Eerdmans, 1967), p155

[Christ is] the one whom they still worship today, the man in Palestine who was crucified because he brought this new form of initiation into the world ... Moreover, that first lawgiver of theirs persuaded them that they are all brothers the moment they transgress and deny the Greek gods and begin worshipping that crucified sophist and living by his laws.’

Lucian of Samosata, *The Death of Peregrinus* 11-13

To this brief list, we could add mention of Jesus in the writings of: Thallos – who refers to the darkness that accompanied the death of Jesus (cf. Mark 15.33; although Thallos’ original work has been lost, it is quoted in the work of Sextus Julius Africanus); Mara bar Serapion – who says that the Jews gained no advantage by executing their ‘wise king’ (Jesus is the only Jewish figure from the time who could fit this description); Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus – who confirms the New Testament report (Acts 18.2) that Claudius had expelled Jews from Rome because of rioting stirred up by ‘Chrestus’ (most Roman historians believe this to be a reference to Christ; the New Testament tells of frequent Jewish riots caused by the claim that Jesus is the Christ); Celsus – who wrote a polemical work late in the second century attacking Christianity.

Despite all this evidence, some people wonder why Jesus receives *so little* mention in Roman history. Actually, the remarkable thing is that he receives *so much*. Understandably, Roman historians were principally concerned with Emperors and wars and other important matters of state. Jesus was born in a shed and died as a criminal. He had no particular physical beauty and died with only a handful of followers. A Roman historian of the day could be forgiven for failing to recognise that Jesus would be the dominant figure of human history. Perhaps that is why the references to Jesus in these writings are almost incidental – and all the more historically valuable for that reason.

Even though the Roman sources tell us nothing about Jesus that we do not already know from the New Testament, they are interesting nonetheless. And they challenge the sceptic who wants to claim that Jesus did not exist, or that the New Testament is entirely a work of fantasy. Neither claim is historically tenable.

## ii) The evidence of Jewish history:

Most scholars would say that the most important Jewish historian of the first century was Flavius Josephus, who lived from AD 37-100, and wrote a mammoth account of the entire history of the Jewish people, entitled, ‘Jewish Antiquities’. Along the way, he makes mention of Pontius Pilate’s treatment of a Jewish teacher named Jesus:

‘At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was perhaps the Messiah-Christ. 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 they reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.’

Flavius Josephus (AD 37-100), *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.63-64<sup>2</sup>

A few sections later, Josephus recounts the way that Ananus, the high priest of Jerusalem treated a man called ‘James’, who is described as the ‘brother of Jesus’:

‘But this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent... He assembled the Sanhedrin of judges and brought before them the brother of Jesus the so-called Messiah-Christ, whose name was James, and some others. When he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them over to be stoned to death.’

<sup>2</sup> This translation of Josephus is based on the best extant Arabic manuscript. The most reliable Greek manuscript shows some evidence of having been tampered with or ‘Christianised’ at a later date by eager Christians. For example, it omits the word ‘perhaps’ from the phrase, ‘He was perhaps the Messiah-Christ’. Whichever reconstruction of Josephus’ text is preferred, this section provides independent confirmation of a historical Jesus, and his fame as a teacher, wonder-worker and martyr.

Another reference is found in a book called the Talmud, an ancient exposition of Jewish law:

‘On the eve of the Passover Jesus was hanged (on a cross). For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, ‘He is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.’ But since nothing was brought forward in his favour, he was hanged on the eve of Passover.

Talmud (*baraittha Sanhedrin* 43a-b), written AD 100-200

A later section of the Talmud, written post 200 AD, again refers to the claim that Jesus’ birth was illegitimate. Specifically, this 3<sup>rd</sup> Century document claims that Jesus’ real identity is Ben Pantera, or Son of Pantera – a Roman soldier:

‘Ben Stada is Ben Pantera. The husband was Stada, the lover was Pantera. The mother was Mary the dresser of women’s hair. She has been false to her husband.’

Talmud (*baraittha Shabbat* 104b)

The claim reflects the story related by the Roman historian Celsus, mentioned above. Clearly, there was something atypical about the birth of Jesus!

### Summary of non-Christian sources that refer to Jesus of Nazareth:

We would not be able to construct a ‘life of Jesus’ from the extra-biblical sources. At best we could come up with an outline of his life. Nevertheless, when we piece together the things that we learn from all of the non-Christian sources about Jesus, we note that an impressive list of New Testament facts are confirmed:

- the name ‘Jesus’
- the place and time-frame of his public ministry (Palestine during Pontius Pilate’s governorship, AD 26-36)
- the name of his mother, Mary
- the ambiguous nature of his birth
- the name of one of his brothers (James)
- his fame as a teacher
- his fame as a miracle-worker / sorcerer
- the fact that people labelled him as ‘Messiah / Christ’
- the fact that some considered Jesus to be ‘kingly’
- the time and manner of his execution (crucifixion around Passover-time)
- the involvement of both the Roman and Jewish leadership in his death
- the coincidence of an eclipse at the time of his crucifixion
- the report of Jesus’ appearances to his followers after his death
- the flourishing of a movement that worshipped Jesus after his death

### Conclusion:

Our question in this section of the booklet has been, ‘Can we trust that the authors of the Gospels wrote accurate history?’ We have seen that we can. Consider the conclusion of one ancient historian:

‘An ancient historian has no problem seeing the phenomenon of Jesus as an historical one. His many surprising aspects only help anchor him in history. Myth or legend would have created a more

predictable figure. The writings that sprang up about Jesus also reveal to us a movement of thought and an experience of life so unusual that something much more substantial than the imagination is needed to explain it.'

E A Judge, Emeritus Professor of History, and Director of the Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University.

Another scholar who has devoted many years of his life to a careful study of the historical authenticity of the New Testament is Craig Blomberg, Professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, Colorado. This is how he summarises his argument for the reliability of the New Testament:

'[The writings of Matthew, Mark and Luke] should all be dated to about AD 60 plus or minus a few years. All this makes it inherently probable that these writers *were able to* record reliable history... A study of the conservative nature of ancient oral tradition – prodigious feats of memory coupled with a flexibility in passing on the tradition within fixed limits – reinforces our belief in this ability...

A careful analysis of the genres of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts suggests that their writers were *not only able to provide trustworthy history*, but that they were *intending to do so*.

The limited external evidence from non-Christian writers, later Christian writers, and Archaeology ... almost always confirms that, where they can be tested, the Evangelists *did* record accurate historical information.

... All of the above evidence is adequate to place the burden of proof on the shoulders of anyone who would deny the trustworthiness of untestable data.'

Prof Craig L Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*

Blomberg's point about the burden of proof is well-made. If it is indeed the case that the Gospel writers were able to, *and* intended to, *and* (as far as we can tell) did write accurate history, the question comes, 'Why would someone not trust the Bible?' We began by asking, 'Is there any good reason to trust the Bible?', but I want to turn the question around and ask, 'Is there any good reason to doubt the Bible?'

We have set out, in very condensed and simple form, some of the reasons why Christians are happy to believe that the Gospel writers recorded accurate historical information about Jesus of Nazareth. I like to ask my friends, 'Why then do you doubt the historical reliability of the New Testament? Is it on the strength of the evidence of history? Have you personally investigated these things and discovered evidence that trumps the conclusions of the scholars quoted in this booklet? Or is it really just that you don't want to believe the things that the New Testament says about Jesus, and so you have rejected the historical reliability of the New Testament without ever having considered it in detail?' A person of integrity would not make that mistake.

In summary, we can say that there is no good reason to doubt, and every reason to trust, that the writers of the Gospels recorded accurate history about Jesus of Nazareth. As remarkable as it may at first appear, could it be that Jesus really is the God that he claims to be? To believe such an enormous claim with confidence, we need not only to demonstrate that the Gospel writers wrote accurate history, but also that their writings have been accurately preserved down the ages. It is to that question that we now turn.

## B: Can we trust that the Bible has been accurately preserved down the ages?

### a) The accusation: we cannot.

Some of my friends are happy to concede that what the Gospel writers originally recorded may have been true and accurate. But for them, that does not solve the problem of the Bible's reliability, because they are convinced that we do not today have access to what was originally written. They ask questions like, 'But what about Chinese whispers? You know what it's like with family stories – after a couple of glasses of wine on Christmas day, all of the facts of a particular story have become so exaggerated that no-one can quite remember what really happened. Maybe that happened with the stories of Jesus. And anyway, the Gospels were written in Greek and our Bibles are translated into English. Just by itself that fact proves that the Bible has been changed down the years.'

As ever, Richard Dawkins expresses the argument forcefully:

'Ever since the nineteenth century, scholarly theologians have made an overwhelming case that the Gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world. All were written long after the death of Jesus, and also after the epistles of Paul, which mention almost none of the alleged facts of Jesus' life. *All were then copied and recopied, through many different 'Chinese Whispers generations' by fallible scribes who, in any case, had their own religious agendas.*

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p 93 (my italics)

### b) The counter-evidence of history:

One very important way of testing whether an ancient historical document has been preserved in its original form down through the ages is to collate all the different surviving manuscripts and to examine their quality. It may surprise some to learn that in comparison to other Ancient writings, the number, date and consistency of the surviving New Testament manuscripts is incredibly impressive. Impressive enough indeed to make us confident that when we read the New Testament today, we are reading (albeit in a different language) exactly what was originally written. Many have found it helpful to see the evidence set out in table form:

#### i) the number of manuscripts:

Work	Number of Surviving manuscripts
Pliny the Younger (history)	7
Plato (Tetralogies)	7
Caesar (Gallic Wars)	10
Tacitus (Annals)	20
Aristotle	49
Sophocles	193
Demosthenes	200
Homer (Iliad)	643
New Testament	24000 (5300 in Greek)

It is worth saying a little more about these 24,000 manuscripts. They do not come in a clear linear sequence, whereby each manuscript is copied from the previous manuscript – warts and all. Rather, with the rapid spread of Christianity, there arose an explosion of manuscripts in different languages and in different parts of the Ancient world. With the benefit of hindsight, we are now able to collate the information from the different manuscripts and check them against each other. As we do so, we can eliminate the 'rogue' manuscripts, and establish with confidence what was originally written. We will say more about this under sub-point (iii) below.

#### ii) the time interval between the date a text was written and our earliest manuscript:

Author	Date written	Earliest copy	Time gap (years)
Pliny	61-113 AD	850 AD	750
Caesar	100-44 BC	900 AD	1000

Plato	427-347 BC	900 AD	1200
Aristotle	384-322 BC	1100 AD	1400

By contrast, ‘the oldest [NT manuscript] is a scrap of papyrus (p<sup>53</sup>) containing John 18.31-33, 37-38, dating from AD 125-130, no more than forty years after John’s Gospel was most probably written. More than thirty papyri date from the late second through early third centuries, including some which contain good chunks of entire books and two of which cover most of the Gospels and Acts (p<sup>45</sup>) or the letters of Paul (p<sup>46</sup>). Four very reliable and nearly complete New Testaments date from the fourth and fifth centuries (a, B, A, C).’

Prof Craig L Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*

### iii) the physical quality of the manuscripts:

Here is Craig Blomberg again:

‘All kinds of minor variations distinguish these [24000] manuscripts from one another, but the vast majority of these variations have to do with changes in spelling, grammar, and style, or accidental omissions or duplications of words or phrases. Only about 400 (less than one per page of English translation) have any significant bearing on the meaning of the passage, and most of these are noted in the footnotes or margins of modern translations and editions of Scripture. The only textual variants which affect more than a sentence or two (and most affect only individual words or phrases) are John 7.53-8.11 and Mark 16.9-20. Neither of these passages is very likely to be what John or Mark originally wrote... But overall, 97-99% of the New Testament can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt, and no Christian doctrine is founded solely or even primarily on textually disputed passages.’

Prof Craig L Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*

It is important to point out that we are not saying that we can be only 97-99% confident that we are reading what was originally written when we open the New Testament today. Rather, we are saying that we can be 100% confident that we are reading what was originally written in 97-99% of the lines of the New Testament. More than that, the science of textual criticism has shown us where the 1-3% of uncertainty occurs. We know exactly which letters / words / phrases are in doubt, and none of them cast any doubt on any major doctrine of Christianity. The nature of these variations is important – none of them deny that Jesus died on the cross or that he rose from the dead! The ‘Chinese whispers’ argument therefore cannot be used to deny that those things actually happened.

### iv) a word on translations:

In one sense, of course, as has been famously said, ‘all translation is treason’. Anyone who has learnt even a little French at school knows that there are phrases / words / expressions in one language (like English) that do not have an exact parallel in another language (like French), and vice versa. The same is true of New Testament Greek and English. No single English translation is able to convey every little nuance or word-play in the original languages. But that is not the same as saying that our modern translations have drastically distorted the flavour of the original: Jesus performed miracles and died and rose again in the original Greek just as much as he does in the modern translations. Anyone who reads the Bible in its original languages (Hebrew and a little Aramaic in the Old Testament, almost exclusively Greek in the New Testament) will tell you that we have an excellent range of modern translations. Some are more literal word-for-word translations (like the New American Standard Bible or, to a lesser extent, the English Standard Version), and some are a little more fluid, aiming to convey the sense of the original (like the New International Version), but they are all seeking to convey accurately what was originally written. Even so, a brief comparison between, for example, the English Standard Version and the New International Version will demonstrate to you that the differences are very minor.

Indeed, it is precisely because Christians are so committed to reading exactly what was originally written that we keep bringing out new translations of the Bible – the number of translations is evidence of our commitment to

get it right, not evidence of distortion. The upshot is that if you are reading a good modern translation (like one of those mentioned here), you can be sure that what you are reading today in a language that you can understand what was originally written. Of course, if you are particularly exercised about this point, you could always go and learn New Testament Greek – your studies will definitely confirm what we are saying here!

## Conclusion:

It is surprising that the ‘Chinese whispers’ argument has survived so long. There is really no evidence at all that the New Testament has been distorted down the ages. Consider the conclusions of a couple of scholars:

‘Scholars of almost every theological stripe attest to the profound care with which the NT books were copied in the Greek language, and later translated and preserved in Syriac, Coptic, Latin and a variety of other European and Middle Eastern languages.’

Prof Craig L Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*

‘The interval then between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.’

Sir Frederick Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology*  
(former Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum)

We set out to establish two things. First, we wanted to be sure that the Gospel writers recorded accurate history. As we surveyed the claims of the Gospel writers themselves, and as we compared their writings with the available non-Christian histories, we concluded that the Gospel writers were able to, intended to, and (as much as we can verify) succeeded in recording accurate historical information about Jesus Christ. Second, we wanted to be sure that the Gospels have been faithfully preserved for us down the ages. The science of textual criticism, together with the quality of our modern translations, enables us to be supremely confident that when we are reading the New Testament today, we are reading true history – Jesus really did say and do the things that are recorded in the New Testament. There is no good historical reason to deny it.

The implications are vast.

## C: Implication: what is the foundational authority in your life?

The question that we are examining in this booklet is really a part of a much larger question – what is the foundational authority upon which we base our lives? The reality, of course, is that whether or not we have thought about it much, each and every one of us has just such an authority in our life – a way of looking at the world that determines our beliefs and dictates our behaviour. Some of us base our ‘worldview’ upon intuition or our own life experience to-date; others are strongly influenced by what their parents or teachers told them while they were growing up; still others look at the world through the lens of a formal religious code of one kind or another. You may never have thought about it in these terms before, but if I were to ask you, ‘What is the foundational authority in your life? What is the bottom line conviction that has most influence on the shape that your life is taking?’ – what would you say? For most of us, it will not be possible to identify a single ‘authority’ but we may be able to come up with a small collection – e.g. what do my family think; what can be proven by science; what does my favourite politician / celebrity say; what feels right? Even so, there are times in life when some of those authorities come into conflict with each other – for example, my own feelings about something may disagree with what my family says. The question then becomes, if my big ‘authorities’ in life come into conflict with each other, which one will win? The answer to that question reveals the foundational authority in your life.

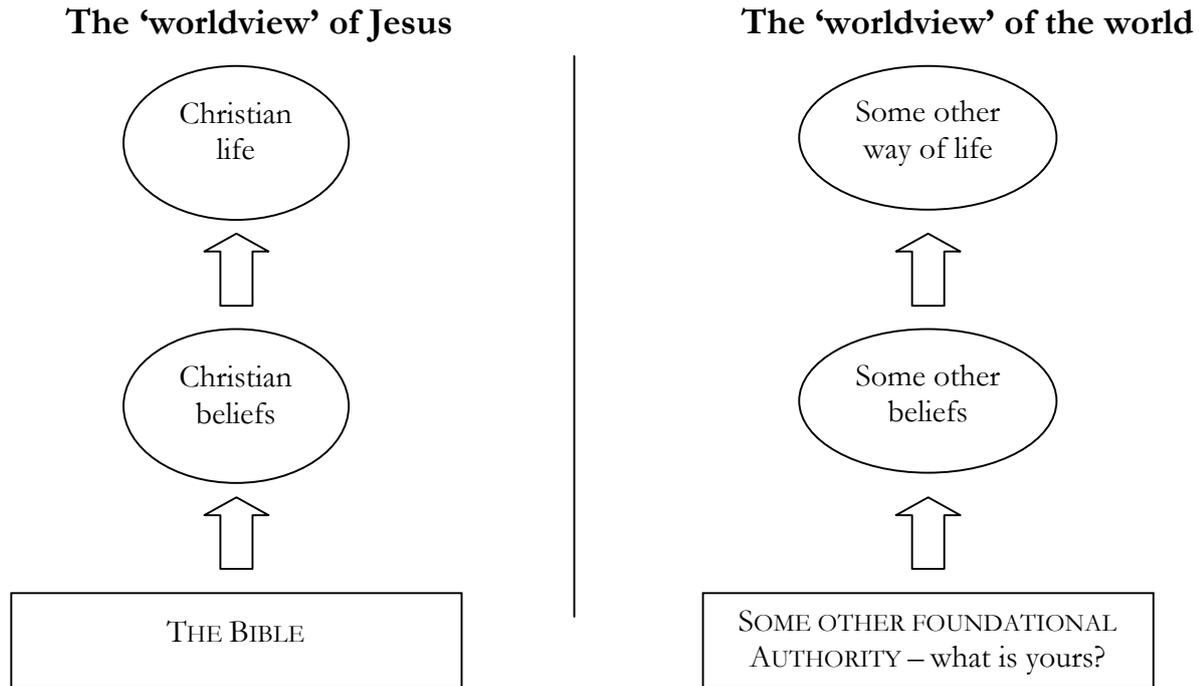
For the Christian, the answer to the question is simple. In theory at least (Christians muck up and live inconsistently all the time), I base everything that I think and every decision that I make about the way that I am going to live on the Bible. That does not mean that the Bible tells me everything in detail about how I should live. The Bible does not, for example, unlike another religious text, tell me in which direction I ought to face when I am going to the toilet. In that sense, it is not an exhaustive rule-book for life. However, by giving me a mixture of specific commands (e.g. ‘do not kill’) and general principles (e.g. ‘love one another’) the Bible does tell me everything that I need to know to understand how God wants me to live in his world. The Bible itself asserts that it is not just a historically reliable book, but it is in fact the very Word of God – perfect in every way. The Bible does not just ‘contain’ the word of God, it is the Word of God. So much so that you could write an equation:

What the Bible says = what God says

In his life, Jesus endorsed this understanding of the Bible. When he quoted things that had been written by men in the Old Testament, he quoted them as the words of God Himself. The Christian, then, is the person who submits to what God says in the Bible and allows that Word to shape their life – wherever it may lead them.

That is one reason why people get so exercised by the claims that Christians make. They realise that we are, in effect, telling people in the world (by the authority of Jesus himself) to change the foundational authority upon which they base their life. From now on, we say, they are to base their life not on their intuition / life experience / what society thinks, but on the fact that the Jesus of the Bible is the Lord and God that he claimed to be. It is a radical challenge.

The diagram below is an attempt to summarise the two options that remain open to us. Please note, there are only two.



Which side of the diagram best represents the way that you are living at the moment? Which side best represents the way that you want to live?

Christians affirm that the New Testament record of the things that Jesus said and did is sufficient evidence to believe that Jesus is nothing less than God himself. In the light of that evidence, we not only worship him and surrender our lives to him, but encourage others to do the same. Some argue that historical inaccuracies in the Gospel accounts render the Bible an unsatisfactory / unreliable / untrue foundation for life and belief. We have seen that this fundamental challenge to Christianity is mistaken. The evidence of history suggests both that the Gospel writers recorded accurate historical information about Jesus and that the Gospels have been accurately preserved down the ages. In other words, when we read the Gospels today, we are reading historical reality. It is hard to overstate the significance of that conclusion. If Jesus really is God, we must take his message seriously. I wonder if you are doing that? I wonder what is stopping you from doing that?

It is beyond the scope of this booklet to attempt to subject every alternative 'foundational authority' to the same sort of scrutiny with which we have examined the historical reliability of the Bible. Suffice it to say here that such work is possible, and necessary. Thoughtful readers will want to ask questions like, 'Have I ever clearly identified why I believe the things I believe? What is the ultimate authority by which I decide what to believe and how to live? How secure is that ultimate authority?'

Whatever the answer to those questions, no alternative authority could possibly be as secure as 'the perfect word of the living God'. This observation raises an important question: do you want to base your life, and indeed your possible eternal destiny, on something that might not be true and secure? Why not make a commitment today to do two things. First, why not think about what you believe and why you believe it? Do your own beliefs stand up to scrutiny? Second, why not pick up one of the Gospel records of Jesus' life and read it? As you read about Jesus, you will be coming face-to-face with your God.

**Further reading:**

This booklet is not attempting to be anything more than a 'first-read' introduction to these questions. Interested readers may want to pick up one of the following as a next step. In the 'Frequently Asked Questions' appendix to this booklet, I make some indication about which book to approach for help with some specific questions:

John Dickson, *The Christ Files* (Blue bottle books, 2006)

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Zondervan, 1998)

Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Zondervan, 2007)

Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 1987)

Paul Barnett, *The truth about Jesus: the challenge of evidence* (Aquila, 1994)

Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (IVP, 1997)

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Eerdmans, 2006)

## Frequently Asked Questions:

### 1. Who were the Gospel writers and when did they write?

#### The Gospel of Mark

##### a) The author

The earliest Christian tradition states that Mark was a colleague of one of the leading eyewitnesses of Jesus, the Apostle Peter. A man named Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis (AD 60-130), probably writing in the first decade of the second century, quoted an even earlier authority named "The Elder":

'This is what the Elder used to say: Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately, though not in order, all that he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not himself heard the Lord or been his follower, but later, as I said, he followed Peter. Peter delivered teachings as occasion required, rather than compiling a sort of orderly presentation of the traditions about the Lord. So Mark was not wrong in recording in this way the individual items as he remembered them. His one concern was to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in reporting them.'

Papias, as quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15

##### b) The date

The respected New Testament scholar R T France summarises his survey of early Christian tradition like this:

'The tradition of the early church then affirms consistently that this Gospel was written by Mark in Rome as a record of Peter's teaching, most probably while Peter was still alive and therefore not later than the early sixties of the first century.'

R T France, *The Gospel of Mark*, p38

#### The Gospel of Matthew

##### a) The author

Although the author of what we call the Gospel of Matthew is nowhere named in the text, the universal testimony of the early church is that it was written by another eyewitness of Jesus, the Apostle Matthew himself. Indeed, there is no historical evidence that the authorship of Matthew's Gospel was ever doubted or that any other author of the book was ever proposed. Always and everywhere, the first book of our New Testament was referred to as, 'The Gospel According to Matthew'. (Matthew writes the story of his own conversion to Christianity into his book at Matthew, chapter 9, verses 9-13.)

##### b) The date

Similarities in some parts of the text suggest that Matthew had access to the Gospel of Mark when he was writing his own account. Partly for this reason, the majority view among scholars today is that Matthew was written some time in the final quarter of the first century. However, an increasing number of scholars have begun to argue that Matthew wrote some time before AD 70. One persuasive argument for this early dating of Matthew is that there are a number of passages in the Gospel which presuppose that the Jewish Temple (which was destroyed in AD 70) was still standing at the time that Matthew wrote (see 5.23-24; 17.24-27; 23.16-22). It is likely then that Matthew wrote some time in the mid to late 60s AD.

#### The Gospel of Luke (and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles)

##### a) The author

Neither the Gospel of Luke nor the Acts of the Apostles names its author directly. However, the combination of evidence from within the text itself (internal evidence) and from outside of the text (external evidence) suggests that Luke was the author of both works.

##### i) Internal evidence

We have already seen Luke's introduction to his books:

<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have

delivered them to us,<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

*The Gospel of Luke chapter 1, verses 1-4*

The author does not claim to be an eyewitness to most of the events he describes, but he does claim to have relied on the evidence of those who were themselves ‘eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.’

It is also worth noting that in his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, the author presents himself as a travelling companion of the Apostle Paul in those parts of Acts known as the ‘we’ sections (Acts 16.10-17; 20.5-15; 21.1-18; 27.1-28.16). This limits the options about the author’s identity.

In summary, internal evidence tells us that the writer knew the Apostle Paul and was at least a second-generation Christian.

## ii) External evidence

Although several people travelled with the Apostle Paul (Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Timothy, Titus, Silas, Epaphras and Barnabas, as well as Luke), the early Christian tradition gives attention to only one name as the author of this two-volume work – Luke. As with the Gospel of Matthew, there is no hint that Luke was ever doubted as the author. He is variously referred to as the author by Clement of Rome, Irenaeus and Eusebius, among others. When we piece together the different strands of Christian tradition about Luke, it seems likely that he was a doctor, possibly from Syria of Antioch, a non-Jew, and that he lived until he was either 74 or 84.

## b) The date

It is significant that Luke’s second volume does not mention the death of James (AD 62), the death of Paul (around AD 65), or the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (AD 70). This has led an increasing number of scholars to question the traditional dating of Luke (in the mid-80s AD), and to suggest a mid-60s date instead.

## The Gospel of John

### a) The author

There has been a lot of debate about the authorship of the fourth Gospel down the years. But there are good reasons to believe that the Apostle John was the author.

First, the text itself identifies the author as ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’:

<sup>20</sup> Peter turned and saw *the disciple whom Jesus loved* following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" <sup>21</sup> When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" <sup>23</sup> So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" <sup>24</sup> *This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.* <sup>25</sup> Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

*The Gospel of John, chapter 21, verses 20-25*

The disciple whom Jesus loved seems to be John, Son of Zebedee. He, Peter and James seem to have been the three disciples that were closest to Jesus – forming an inner-core of disciples within the twelve (see, for example, Mark 5.37 and Mark 9.2).

Second, there are several strong eyewitness claims within the text – which would fit if the author was among Jesus’ first disciples (see, for example, John 1.14; 19.25-27; 20.30-31). This is important because even if the Apostle John is not himself the author (and there is no good reason to think that he was not!), it remains the case that whoever wrote John was himself an eyewitness of Jesus, and also that his writing was accepted as being historically accurate from the earliest days!

Third, there is strong (although not universal) external evidence in support of the Apostle John as the author. For example, Irenaeus, writing in the second century, describes the composition of each of the four Gospels. After mentioning the other three Gospels, he writes:

‘John, the disciple of our Lord, who also leaned upon his breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.’

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1

Later in the same book (3.11.1), Irenaeus quotes several verses from the Gospel, and again attributes them to, ‘John, the disciple of the Lord.’

In his excellent book, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, Prof Craig Blomberg concludes (page 40):

‘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.’

## b) The date

Again, the scholars are divided. Some argue that the Gospel of John was written in the 80’s or 90’s AD (if accepted, this would not question the authorship of the book by the Apostle John, since it was widely reported that he lived well into old age), while other scholars have opted for a date in the 60’s AD.

## 2. Doesn’t the time gap between when Jesus lived and when the Gospels were completed make it impossible for them to be a reliable historical record?

It is worth noting that, in ancient terms, the biographies of Jesus arrived on the scene relatively quickly. For example, the earliest biography of Mohammed, founder of Islam, was composed around AD 760, 125 years after his death, and continued to be edited for another 50 years. Again, the first records of the life and sermons of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha: 448-368 BC) appeared fully 350 years after his death. For the Gospels to be written within 30-60 years of Jesus’ death is surprising.

Arguments like these prompted the archaeologist WF Albright to write, ‘The [time] period [between the events of Jesus’ life and the writing of the Gospels] is too slight to permit any appreciable corruption of the essential centre and even of the specific wording of the sayings of Jesus.’

We need to remember further that Paul’s letters were written earlier still. One Ancient Historian, John Dickson, writes, ‘These establish beyond doubt that Jesus’ teachings, death and resurrection, together with his status as Messiah-Christ, were being taught by missionaries and committed to memory by Christians in the early 30s AD’ (John Dickson, *The Christ Files*, p 58).

The arguments of Dickson and Albright are strengthened yet more when due weight is given to the strong oral culture of the first century. That is, in a culture when few people could read (and even fewer owned books), writing things down was not the most effective way to preserve and promote material – the most practical and trusted means was by committing stories about Jesus to memory and passing them down through the generations. Dickson suggests that the closest thing to oral tradition that we have today is probably pop music. He points out that many people know the words to a great number of songs off by heart. They probably did not ever pore over the album cover to learn the words, but as they heard the songs time and again, as they sang along to them and performed them in the shower, the words passed into their heads without much effort. Dickson asks us to imagine that we really believed the words of our favourite 20 songs contained the secret of eternal life. And that all of our friends and family shared that conviction. And that on an almost daily basis we went to a meeting with a teacher who recited the words to the songs time and again, and tested us on our ability to do so. It is fairly safe to assume that we would be able to preserve the words to those songs accurately without ever writing them down. The earliest Christians cherished the words of Jesus because they believed that in them was *life*. That is why they were able to preserve them so accurately.

For more on this question, see John Dickson, *The Christ Files*.

### 3. When were Paul's letters written and is it really the case that Paul's letters 'mention almost none of the alleged facts of Jesus' life'?

Paul's letters were written at various points between the date of his conversion to Christianity (probably in AD 34) and his death (probably in AD 65). As such, his letters are an even earlier source of historical information about Jesus. His letters do not set out to convey the events of Jesus' life (they were written to churches or individuals who already knew about Jesus' life); nevertheless, they mention in passing the following facts about Jesus' life:

- i. Jesus' descent from King David.
- ii. The name and status of Jesus' brother James.
- iii. Jesus' instructions to missionaries.
- iv. Jesus' teaching about marriage, love, and the treatment of enemies.
- v. Jesus' last supper.
- vi. Jesus' betrayal.
- vii. Jesus' execution and burial.
- viii. Jesus' resurrection from the dead.
- ix. Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to eyewitnesses (including to Paul himself).
- x. Jesus' status as the Messiah-Christ.

For more on this question, see Paul Barnett, *The truth about Jesus: the challenge of evidence*.

[include material on tradition of resurrection as coming within a year or two of it]

### 4. Weren't these four Gospels selected, almost at random, from a collection of many other Gospels?

It is certainly the case that many other books were written about Jesus – the six most commonly referred to are The Gospels of Thomas, Peter, and Mary, the Secret Gospel of Mark, the Jesus Papers and the Gospel of Judas.

In trying to evaluate the accuracy of these sources, historians consider things like when the Gospels were written (the earlier the better), where they were written (the closer the better), and how well they were written (are they culturally accurate in what they say about events or politics).

When you apply these tests to the other 'Gospels', it becomes clear why from the earliest days the Christian community settled on the *four* Gospels that we have in our Bible today. For example, Prof Craig A Evans (who recently wrote a book called *Fabricating Jesus: how modern scholars distort the Gospels*) says about the Gospel of Thomas, 'Everything points to Thomas being written at the end of the second century [in Syria], no earlier than 175 and probably closer to 200 [AD].'

For more on this question, see Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*.

### 5. Weren't the Gospel writers biased?

Every historian, and indeed every writer is biased in one way or another. That is, every historian has an opinion or an angle on the events that they are reporting. There is no such thing as purely objective history. The Gospel writers are no exception. The good news is that they make no secret of their intention in writing. They are personally committed followers of Jesus who want to persuade others to believe in Jesus as well. John writes:

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;

<sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

*The Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 30-31*

The real question to ask, therefore, is not, 'Were the Gospel writers biased?', but rather, 'Did they have *good reason* to be biased?' That is, were they telling the truth? If the Gospel writers really had seen Jesus putting cripples back on their feet, giving sight to the blind and raising the dead; if they really had seen him die and then

rise again from the dead in bodily form, then they had good reason to believe that he was God. And they had good reason to try and persuade others to share their conviction as well. We have seen already that there is good reason to believe that they really were writing accurate history when they told us about Jesus. The only sensible thing for us to do in response is to get on our knees before him in worship. If we fail to do that, it will not be because of a lack of evidence. It will be because we simply do not want to go where the evidence of history points us. In that case, we will not just be wrong, but disingenuous as well.