

Who were the authors of the gospels - can they be trusted?



Big picture: This article explores the authorship and credibility of the four gospels, addressing common objections and presuppositions. It argues that early evidence, historical consistency, and manuscript support affirm the reliability and authenticity of the gospel accounts of Jesus.

1. Can we trust the Gospels?

The noted atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell was once asked, “If you meet God after you die, what would you say to Him to justify your unbelief?” “I will tell him that he did not give me enough evidence” Russell answered.

Like Russell, many people would use a similar reason to reject the Christian faith. But are they right? Or is there actually plenty of reliable evidence in existence? Are the gospels to be doubted or do they provide a clear and accurate account of the life and work of Jesus Christ?



2. Rejection of the gospels is driven by presuppositions, not evidence

I believe the problem is not the lack of evidence - the real issue is the lenses people are using to see the evidence. The problem is people’s presuppositions – the things that people assume about the evidence.

What presuppositions exist? There are many. An atheist might come with a presupposition that supernatural miracles are not credible events. They might assume, therefore, that all the miracles which are described in the four gospels are mythical. Muslims, on the other hand, might come with a presupposition that the four gospels are not supernatural enough. They may assume that God’s word is supposed to be the verbatim words of Allah whereas the four gospels are the supposed words of men.

When it comes to the specific issue of the authorship of the Gospels, the Islamic assumptions are generally that the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are not the true source of information on Jesus’ life. The true source for Jesus’ life and his teaching was the *Injil*, (*an Arabic word for gospel*) which was given to Jesus by Allah. My Muslim friends claim the “Islamic view of Jesus” is the truth, which is described in the Qur’an; that the Christian view of Jesus was corrupted and fabricated by later Christians. And finally, that Allah sent a final revelation “the Qur’an”, to restore what was lost.

But do these presuppositions match the evidence? Are the gospels as unreliable as some suggest?

Rather than assuming the answers are obvious, it is important to look at some of the common questions in more depth and to see where the weight of evidence lays. There are many questions to explore – we can’t cover all the ground today – but we can at least begin and look at questions like:

- How can the four gospels be the word of God since the text does not even claim that it is God’s revelation? After all, there are no original manuscripts of the gospels remaining. The four gospels were anonymous documents. The names of the authors were appended later by the early church.
- The authors, especially two of them (Mark and Luke) were not disciples of Jesus. So how can we trust their version of the stories?

3. The Gospels Were Not Anonymous to Their Original Recipients

When we read the four gospels of the New Testament we find no mention of the names of the authors in the text. So, how do we really know who wrote them? How can we be sure that the four gospels were written by the people whose names have been attached to them? Were in fact the gospels anonymous?

The disciples of Jesus preached the gospels initially in Jerusalem. When the gospel was preached locally, it could be spread by word of mouth. But, in time, there was a need for it to be written down and spread to other parts of the world. In the first century there was no postal service as we have today. When someone had to send a large document somewhere it happened through a courier: a person who carried a document and had knowledge of both the sender and the recipient. It would be inconceivable to assume that a recipient would receive a document without asking who it was from. When the gospels were circulated to the wider audience the knowledge about the authors was passed on.

The names of the writers were indeed known, Bruce Metzger says

In the book trade of antiquity the title of a roll that contained a single work would have its title written on a strip or tag (silluboj) of papyrus or vellum projecting from the back of the roll. Inside the roll the title was placed also at the end of the work. Usually the title is expressed in the simplest possible form: the author's name in the genitive case, then the title, followed (if applicable) by the number of the book.¹

Richard Bauckham observes that many ancient works were 'anonymous' in the same 'formal' sense, for example Lucian's *Life of Demonax*, 'which as a *bios* (ancient biography) is generically comparable with the Gospels. Lucian 'speaks throughout in the first person and obviously expects his readers to know who he is'.² When Christians received Mark's gospel they would have known who Mark was. (A companion of the apostle Peter). The same is true with the other gospels.

It's worth comparing this with how the Qur'an was written down. The text of the Qur'an does not say who wrote the work. We learnt through the Islamic traditions (which were written almost 250 years after the death of Muhammad) it was Muhammad's secretary (Zaid bin Thabit) who wrote it. People knew who Zaid bin Thabit was.

Through multiple sources we learn that Mark was the apostle Peter's scribe.

Papias (c. 70 -155) states:

Mark became the interpreter of Peter... For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them.'

Irenaeus (c. 180) wrote (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1): 'After their departure [of Peter and Paul], Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter'. It is clearly indicated by the earliest church father that Mark accurately handed down to the early church what he learnt from the apostle Peter.

The early church unanimously agreed '...all of the external evidence — the witness of the early church fathers — uniformly supports the belief that Matthew (the tax collector turned disciple), Mark (the companion of Peter and Paul), and Luke (Paul's "beloved physician") penned the Gospels attributed to them.'³

Can the earlier church fathers be mistaken in appending the names of the authors to the gospels?

It's worth exploring this further. And by using the criterion of embarrassment and multiple attestations we can be sure they were not mistaken at all.

4. The Criterion of Embarrassment: The gospel authors were unlikely choices, which supports their authenticity

Dr. Craig Blomberg, who is considered to be one of the foremost authorities on the biographies of Jesus, rhetorically asks why Christians as early as the second century would ascribe authorship 'to three such unlikely candidates' as Matthew, Mark and Luke 'if they did not in fact write them?'⁴ Neither Mark nor Luke were among the Twelve Apostles, and Matthew had held the dubious profession of being a tax-collector for the Romans. If these gospels were written by other than who the early church was appending then we would have found some disagreement over the authorship. Blomberg says "There are no known competitors for these gospels, it was just not in dispute."

If Mark and Luke were not the disciples of Jesus then how can we claim the gospels were eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life? Internally in the book of Acts and externally the early church fathers' evidence clearly show Mark and Luke were actively involved in ministries with the disciples.

If the credibility of the authors is still in doubt then let us examine two other possibilities. Perhaps the authors were either being deceptive or were themselves deceived? If their motive was to deceive people deliberately then one would assume that they would not have left the gospels "anonymous". In order to convince people and endorse some authority to the text which they have written they could have added falsely prominent apostles' name such as Peter, or James. Or they could have pretended and falsely add a sentence such as "this gospel we have received from an angel, it came directly from God". Some might have reasoned and rejected their claim but others might have believed that the gospels were divine revelation.

Perhaps their intention was pure but they were deceived themselves and had received false information about Jesus. But we know that they double checked all the information because they spent time with the apostles by travelling with them they heard Jesus teaching again and again.

What was the intention of the authors in writing the four gospels? Were they interested in writing what actually happened? We see especially in Luke's gospel his reason for writing the text:

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... [Luke 1:1-4](#)

Luke is clearly saying he intended to write accurately about the things he investigated and found to be well-supported by witnesses."

Was the author reliable in getting the facts right? **Colin Hemer**, a classical scholar [found] Again and again Luke's [complete] accuracy...Ranging from what would have been common knowledge down to details which only a local person would know: from the sailings of the Alexandrian corn fleet to the coastal terrain of the islands to the peculiar and shifting titles of local officials, Luke gets it right. According to the classical historian **A. N. Sherwin-White**⁵, "For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd." The judgement of **Sir William Ramsay**⁶, a world-famous archaeologist, still stands: "Luke is a historian of the first rank This author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

The theology has to flow from accurate history? If the history is accurate it supports the theological credibility. We learnt from classical historians that the author is reliable in getting the facts right.

What further evidence can be provided?

5. Manuscript and historical evidence supports the gospels

We have a mountain of manuscript evidence available: We have 5,664 Greek manuscripts. There are thousands of ancient New Testament manuscripts in other languages. There are 10,000 Latin Vulgate manuscripts, plus a total of 8,000 in Ethiopic, Slavic, and Armenian. In all there are about 24,000 manuscripts in existence. F.F. Bruce, an eminent professor and author of *The New Testament Documents*:

Are they Reliable? says "there is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament." Sir Frederic Kenyon is the former director of the British Museum and author of *The Palaeography of Greek Papyri*. Kenyon has said that "in no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest manuscripts so short as in that of the New Testament." His conclusion: "The last foundation for any doubt that the scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed." If we refer to Metzger and Ehrman, we find an even more startling point about the early church leaders' quotations from the New Testament – that one could essentially reconstruct the entire NT from their writings.

If we pile up the manuscript evidence here it might touch the ceiling. Someone might say "you know what, I am not impressed!" All this manuscript evidence is late, "I want evidence from the first century, or at least many thousands from the second century". Let us ask the same question of what evidence we have of the Injil (which Muslims believe was direct Revelation given to Jesus). We are not asking for the original manuscript, but do we have any copy of a copy of a copy of the Injil? The answer is NO. Do we find any reference of the Injil in any books of antiquity? The answer is NO. If we pile up manuscript evidence of the New Testament on one hand we can contrast this with the complete lack of evidence for the Injil. Our Muslim friends will still believe and claim that the Injil was the true source of the life and the teaching of Jesus. Then only one reason is left to justify the existence of the Injil and that is the Qur'an. They will claim it is the eternal word of Allah so how can it be wrong. But why there are no original manuscripts of the Qur'an in existence? There is a very good reason for not having the original manuscripts of the gospels because they were written on papyrus in the first century (and papyrus disintegrates and needs to be copied). There are no good reasons for not having the original copy of the Qur'an in the seventh century, as it was written on parchment (animal skin) which is much more durable than papyrus. Even if there was an original manuscript in existence the question remains what evidence is there to justify that there was an Injil given to Jesus? According to Quran 61.14, Jesus was spreading Islam in the first century and his disciples were helping Allah who gave them power to triumph over those who were spreading the Christian view of Jesus. However historically speaking there is no evidence for this. The point is, it is illogical and irrational to reject the Christian view of Jesus on the basis that there are no original manuscripts of the four gospels and yet accept the Injil as fact even though there is no historical evidence of its existence.

Going back to my introduction, a lack of evidence is not the only reason to reject Christianity as the truth. It is presupposition which does not allow people to interpret the evidence fairly. Believing in an Islamic view of Jesus requires a leap of faith only, whereas the Christian view of Jesus can be scrutinised and examined on the basis of historical information which is provided in the gospels.

6. Conclusion: The reasons we can trust the Gospels

In Summary, what are the reasons why the four gospels can be trusted?

- Recognition of the apostolic authority of the gospels by the early church: The early church recognises that the origin of the four gospels is the apostles.
- Antiquity: The earliest account – written while the eyewitnesses were still alive: The four gospels were written in the first century while the eyewitnesses were still alive. It is important because if they have written anything which was not accurate that could have been confronted by the eyewitnesses.
- Criterion of multiple attestations: Through multiple sources it is confirmed that the authors of the four gospels were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. As Dr. Craig Blomberg affirms "There are no known competitors for these gospels, it was just not in dispute."
- Criterion of embarrassment: The integrity of the early church is clearly seen. The early church could have easily covered up by appending the Apostle Peter's name to the gospel of Mark in order to give more apostolic authority. Instead of Luke, they could have added in the text gospel according to Paul or other apostles who have more prominent figures. But they did not, which shows authenticity.

- *The authors had no status or power: The authors of the gospels did not have any political, military or religious power that would have allowed them to impose their dogma on people. Socially they were unprivileged people. Christians faced enormous persecution. They had no power to influence people. They had nothing to gain by fabricating the evidence.*
- *Historical corroboration: The gospels connect us with the real world. It takes us back to the first century. They give the names of Roman officials, tell us who was the emperor, tells us the titles of the Roman officials. They give the names of places and locations. All these details can be verified through independent sources. It describes the religious sects of Jews who were confronting the teaching of Jesus. They inform us who the disciples of Jesus were, what their names were, what their professions were. They tell us the interaction which they had with Jesus.*
- *Theological corroboration: The authors quote so many verses from the Old Testament which reflects their understanding of the teaching of the prophets of the Old Testament. They were able to recognise how Jesus' teaching corresponds with the Old Testament.*

There really is no need to doubt who wrote the gospels or that the content is genuine.

References

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2. 2 Bauckham, Richard, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospel as Eyewitness Tradition*, (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006) p. 300
3. 3 Blomberg, Craig, 'Where do we start studying Jesus?', in Wilkins, Michael J., Moreland, J.P. (Ed.), *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995),, p. 28.
4. 4 Ibid.
5. 5 A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 189.
6. 6 William M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), p. 222.