

## Jesus & the Evidence

John Morris

Some doubt that Jesus ever existed. But they're in the minority. There's just too much evidence to the contrary.

The first-century Roman historian, Tacitus (born c. AD 55), mentions Jesus in his *Annals of Imperial Rome*.<sup>1</sup> Tacitus' contemporary, Josephus (born c. AD 37), references Jesus twice in his *Antiquities of the Jews*.<sup>2</sup> The Roman administrator, Pliny the Younger (born AD 61), mentions Jesus in a letter to Emperor Trajan.<sup>3</sup> And the second-century satirist, Lucian of Samosata (born AD 125), speaks of Jesus in his work *The Death of Peregrine*.<sup>4</sup>

None of these authors was a Christian, yet each spoke of Jesus as a known historical figure, one who had impacted his world in recent times.

So the question before every thinking person is not "Did Jesus exist?" but rather, "What's the truth about him?" Was Jesus the Son of God as Christians believe, or was he something less? And how can we know?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (i.e., "the gospels") claim to be historical records of Jesus' life, particularly his ministry. And in their accounts, they write that Jesus said and did all the things that Christians claim for him: that he said he was the Son of God, that he performed miracles, that he rose from the dead, that he said he is the only way to God. Monumental claims. But not the sort of things one can be expected to believe without evidence.

So is there evidence to support the historical reliability of the gospels? Absolutely.

### PUT THEM TO THE TEST

Concerning any historical document, three basic tests can be applied to determine its reliability.<sup>5</sup> They are

1. The Bibliographical Test (Is the text we have now what was originally written?)
2. The Internal Evidence Test (Does the text bear the marks of credible history?)
3. The External Evidence Test (Is there evidence outside the text to support its claims?)

These tests are identical for both secular and sacred documents. No exceptions exist for either category. If a historical work is trustworthy, it will pass these tests. If it's not, it won't.

Let's apply the first of these tests to the gospels and see how they do.

### THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL TEST

As already mentioned, this test seeks to answer the question, "Is the text that we are reading now a trustworthy transmission of what was originally written?" The gospels were written nearly 1,400 years before the invention of the printing press. So for well over a millennium, their dissemination among believers, as well as their transmission from one generation to the next, depended upon the work of scribes. Scribes made copies and then copies of copies. At some point, the original documents were lost to history, and the copies were all that remained.<sup>6</sup> The question naturally arises, then, "Are the copies accurate?" Though careful and highly trained, ancient scribes certainly were capable of making mistakes. And they did (more on that later). So how can we have any confidence that the gospels we're reading now bear any resemblance to the originals? Let's see what the evidence reveals.

### NUMBER OF MANUSCRIPTS<sup>7</sup>

To begin with, consider that we have over 5,800 ancient manuscripts (i.e., copies in the original language) of the New Testament. No other ancient work boasts even half that number (the New Testament's closest competitor is Homer's *Iliad*, for which we have fewer than 2,000 copies). And that number—over 5,800—doesn't include the thousands of ancient translations of the New Testament or the

many quotations from the New Testament found in commentaries, sermons, letters, etc., produced by early Christians. Inclusion of the translations alone would bring the number to over 24,000. This mountain of material puts us in a very good place. With so many samples available for scrutiny, scholars have been able to make an extensive examination of the gospels' paper trail. Those thousands of documents have been meticulously and painstakingly checked, re-checked, and cross-checked. And what has all this labor revealed? With only the very rarest of exceptions, the substance of the original narratives is beyond all question. The text of the gospels was not "lost in transmission."

#### AGE OF MANUSCRIPTS<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the number, the age of these manuscripts is also extremely significant. The interval between the earliest of them and the original compositions is uniquely small among ancient writings. For example, the oldest surviving manuscript of Homer's *Iliad* was copied 400 years after the original was penned. In Tacitus' *Annals of Imperial Rome*, the gap between the oldest surviving copy and the original is over 700 years. For Josephus' *The Jewish War*, it's over 800 years.<sup>8</sup> For Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, it's over 900 years. And for the works of Herodotus and Plato, the oldest manuscripts that are of any use to us post-date the originals by at least 1,300 years! Yet, the existing texts of all these ancient books are routinely regarded as reliable by scholars.

How do the gospels compare? We possess manuscripts that date to within 50-100 years of the originals.<sup>9</sup> Unparalleled by any other ancient work. As Sir Frederic Kenyon, former director of the British Museum has said: "[I]n 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."<sup>10</sup> To call into question the reliability of the gospel texts, then, is to call into question all of ancient history! That is something no reputable scholar would be willing to do.

#### VARIATION AMONG MANUSCRIPTS

"But there are variations in how the copies read," someone will say. And that is true. Upon comparison, we do find that there are variant readings in the manuscripts. Scribes did make mistakes. For example, we observe in **Matthew 1:18** that some manuscripts read "the birth of Jesus Christ," while others read "the birth of Christ Jesus." Another reads "the birth of Christ," while yet another "the birth of Jesus." Four variant readings. But are they significant? No. The substance of the passage remains firmly intact. Even atheist Bart Ehrman has admitted: "To be sure, of all the hundreds of thousands of textual changes found among our manuscripts, most of them are completely insignificant, immaterial, and of no real importance for anything other than showing that scribes could not spell or keep focused any better than the rest of us."<sup>11</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

So as far as the text of the gospels is concerned, we can be confident that we have a reliable record of what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote all those years ago. As one respected scholar has noted: "...if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt."<sup>12</sup> The question for us is not whether we have what the gospel writers intended for us to have, but whether or not we will believe it.

#### ENDNOTES

1. *Annals of Imperial Rome*, 15:44
2. *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.3.3 and 20.9.1
3. *Epistulae (Letters)*, vol. 2, 10:96
4. *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13
5. *Introduction to Research in English Literary History* (Sanders), p. 143ff
6. This is a universal reality. We do not possess the original of any ancient document.

7. Manuscript totals and dates are taken from: <https://www.josh.org/wp-content/uploads/Bibliographical-Test-Update-08.13.14.pdf>
8. *The Case for Christ* (Strobel), p. 60
9. *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible* (Holden, Geisler), p. 373
10. *Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, p. 5
11. *Misquoting Jesus*, p. 207
12. *The New Testament Documents* (Bruce), p. 10