

DEFENDING THE GOSPELS

INTRODUCTION

We can learn two lessons from trials in the American court system:

1. The evidence can be aligned to point in more than one direction
2. We align the evidence, knowingly or unknowingly, to fit our preconceptions and biases (paradigm)

One skeptic-turned-believer states: "I had read enough philosophy and history to find support for my skepticism-- a fact here, a scientific theory there, a pithy quote, a clever argument."

- Believers: have we read any? are we ready to contend with even the most basic arguments?

Support for defending the faith

1 Cor 1:18 - 31

2 Cor 10:4 - 5

Acts 17:16 - 34

EXAMINING THE RECORD

"synoptic"- to view at the same time. Mathew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic gospels because of their similar outline and relationship

Motive regarding authorship: no reason to lie about who wrote the synoptic gospels.

- Mark and Luke weren't even among the 12 disciples. Matthew was a former hated tax collector.
- contrast to the fanciful apocryphal gospels later, who chose well-known and exemplary figures to be their fictitious authors

Historical acknowledgement of Authorship:

- Papias, 125 A.D.:
 - specifically affirmed that Mark had recorded Peter's observations. Mark "made no mistake" and "did not include any false statement"
 - said that Matthew had preserved the teachings of Jesus as well
- Irenaeus, 180 A.D.:
 - "Matthew published his own Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue" when Peter and Paul were in Rome
 - "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching."
 - "Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel preached by his teacher."
 - "Then John. . . produced his Gospel while he was living in Ephesus in Asia."

Motive regarding content:

- written with obvious care and exactitude, with incidental details. Does not contain the outlandish flourishes and blatant mythologizing in other ancient writings
- contain “embarrassing” details
 - Jesus at one point did not have the power to perform miracles because of a lack of faith by the people
- Contradictions
 - There’s enough of a discrepancy to show that there could have been no previous concert among them; and at the same time such substantial agreement as to show that they were all independent narrators of the same great transaction

Style:

- ancient writers did not write chronologically, and did not give equal weight to all periods of a person’s life (birth, life, death).
- Ancient Greek and Hebrew didn’t even have a symbol for quotation marks
- In the ancient world the idea of writing a dispassionate, objective history merely to chronicle events, with no ideological purpose, was unheard of
 - thus, if we can reasonably reconstruct history from other ancient sources, we should be able to do so from the gospels
- theologically, the crucifixion is important, hence the focus on the events leading up to that

The difference of John:

- old assumption was that John had the other three, and chose to write his gospel as a supplement to their material
- now it is assumed that John was largely independent of the other three, hence the different choices of material and different perspectives on Jesus
- For almost every major theme or distinctive in John, you can find parallels in the other three

Dating of the Gospels:

- standard scholarly dating:
 - Mark in the 70s, Matthew and Luke in the 80s, John in the 90s
 - still within the lifetimes of eyewitnesses, including hostile witnesses who could correct or contradict
- comparison to Alexander the Great
 - Arrian and Plutarch’s biographies were more than 400 years later, yet historians consider them to be generally trustworthy
- early option
 - Acts cuts off early, before Paul’s death, thus cannot be written later than AD 62
 - Acts is the second of a two-part work, of which Luke is the first
 - Luke incorporates parts of Mark’s gospel, meaning Mark is earlier
 - puts Mark at AD 60 at the latest--an ancient “news flash”

- a good case can be made for Christian belief in the Resurrection, though not written down, less than two years from the event.
 - Creed in 1 Cor 15. If the Crucifixion was AD 30, Paul's conversion was in 32. Three years in Damascus. His first meeting with the apostles would be AD 35. At some point in there, Paul was given this creed, which had already been formulated and was being used by the early church.

Ability to get it right

- oral culture
- Jewish rabbis became famous for having the entire OT memorized, so it is well within the disciples capability to commit a ton to memory and pass it on accurately
- how come this isn't like the game "telephone?": when you're carefully memorizing something and taking care not to pass it along until you're sure you've got it right, you're doing something very different than playing the game of telephone
 - to analogize it to Jesus culture and time, it would be like every third person being able to go back to the first person and say "do I still have it right?"

Credibility

- No gain. The disciples had nothing to gain except criticism, ostracism, and martyrdom. No financial gain. But they proclaimed what they saw, even when it meant suffering and death
- Adverse witnesses. People existed at the time who could have discredited the movement. They had an option to tell history better.
 - but later Jewish writings called Jesus a sorcerer who led Israel astray--which acknowledges that he really did work wonders
 - no one said, "we're here to tell you he did not do these things."

PRESERVATION AND CORROBORATION

The new testament is in a class of its own when compared to the preservation of other ancient literature.

- Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*: Long gap between the time Tacitus sought his information and wrote it down and the only existing copies. It was written in AD 116. His first six books exist only in one manuscript, copied about AD 850. Books 11 - 17 are in another manuscript from the 11th century. Books 7 - 10 are lost.
- Josephus, *The Jewish War*: 9 existing Greek manuscripts, copied in the 10 - 12th centuries. One Latin translation from the 4th century
- New Testament. **More than 5,000 manuscripts have been catalogued.** "Embarrassing" when compared to other ancient works
 - Second to the NT is Homer's *Iliad*, of which 650 manuscripts exist. Even these, though, are fragmented, and come from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD...and the original work was from 800 BC. . . . quite a lengthy gap

- “There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.” F.F. Bruce.
- “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.” Sir Frederic Kenyon.

Author	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span	Copies
Secular Manuscripts:				
Herodotus (History)	480 - 425 BC	900 AD	1,300 years	8
Thucydides (History)	460 - 400 BC	900 AD	1,300 years	?
Aristotle (Philosopher)	384 - 322 BC	1,100 AD	1,400 years	5
Caesar (History)	100 - 44 BC	900 AD	1,000 years	10
Pliny (History)	61 - 113 AD	850 AD	750 years	7
Suetonius (Roman History)	70 - 140 AD	950 AD	800 years	?
Tacitus (Greek History)	100 AD	1,100 AD	1,000 years	20
Biblical Manuscripts: (note: these are individual manuscripts)				
Magdalene Ms (Matthew 26)	1st century	50-60 AD	co-existant (?)	
John Rylands (John)	90 AD	130 AD	40 years	
Bodmer Papyrus II (John)	90 AD	150-200 AD	60-110 years	
Chester Beatty Papyri (N.T.)	1st century	200 AD	150 years	
Diatessaron by Tatian (Gospels)	1st century	200 AD	150 years	
Codex Vaticanus (Bible)	1st century	325-350 AD	275-300 years	
Codex Sinaiticus (Bible)	1st century	350 AD	300 years	
Codex Alexandrinus (Bible)	1st century	400 AD	350 years	

*Total New Testament manuscripts = 5,300 Greek; MSS, 10,000; Latin Vulgates, 9,300 others =

24,000 copies

Compiling the New Testament

- The NT books became canonical because no one could stop them from doing so. Like the analogy, “the most traveled roads in Europe are the best roads; that’s why they’re do heavily traveled.”
- **Criteria used**
 1. Apostolic authority. they must have been written either by the apostles themselves, or by followers of the apostles. If a writing was clearly by an apostle, then it was definitely regarded as authoritative and certainly to be included in the canon.
 - a. Mark was a helper of Peter
 - Luke an associate of Paul
 - for this reason, James and Jude encountered some hesitation
 2. Antiquity. It had to belong to the apostolic age.
 3. Orthodoxy. Simply, conformity to the rule of faith. Was the document congruent with the basic Christian tradition that the Church recognized as normative?
 4. Continuous acceptance. Did the document have continuous acceptance and usage by the church at large?
 5. Inspiration.

Corroboration

Josephus

- *The Antiquities*: “He convened a meeting of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.”
- *Testimonium Flavium*. Contains a longer passage about Jesus that has been tampered with, but still corroborates Jesus’ life

Tacitus. In AD 115 he explicitly states that Nero persecuted the Christians as scapegoats to divert suspicion away from himself for the great fire of Rome in AD 64..

Pliny the Younger. Also corroborates that Christians existed and would not deny their faith in the face of torture and execution in AD 111.

Phlegon. Greek author corroborates that the earth had “the greatest eclipse of the sun” and the “it became night in the sixth hour of the day so that even the stars appeared in the heavens.” Also notes an earthquake. All this occurred “in the fourth year after the 202nd Olympiad (i.e., 33 AD)”

Jewish Rabbinical writings. Though mentioning Jesus only sparingly, confirm that he was a healer and miracle worker (though attributing those deeds to sorcery), that he had disciples, and that they though he was a “heretic” or a “deceiver.”

Archaeology

- Archaeology has not produced anything that is unequivocally a contradiction to the Bible
- Luke's references to thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands have been examined and not a single mistake found

Rebuttal--Refuting the Jesus Seminar

- **Flawed Criteria.** Their assumptions and premises are skewed to achieve the results they want. In other words, the results are predetermined. All assumptions are rooted in their suspicion of the gospels, which comes from their assumption that the supernatural cannot occur.
 - they rule out supernatural explanations from the beginning (this is not historical but metaphysical)
 - they assume that the later church put sayings into the mouth of Jesus unless they have good evidence to think otherwise
 - double dissimilarity. They will believe Jesus said something if it doesn't look like something a rabbi or later church would say. With Jesus being Jewish and founding the Christian church, there's not going to be a whole lot of saying that can pass this.
 - multiple attestation. we can only be sure Jesus said something if it's found in more than one source. And Matthew, Mark, and Luke don't count because they're too similar.
 - obvious problem is that this is not applied to ancient history-- most of ancient history is based on only one source writing.
- **"Secret Mark."** "a nonexistent work cited by a now nonexistent text by a late second-century writer who's known for being naive about these things. There is no credibility to this "Secret Mark."
- **Gospel of Thomas.** written mid second-century and influenced by Gnosticism (a heresy that salvation is by what you knew--*gnosis* is Greek for "know").
 - "There is no good reason for preferring the second-century Gospel of Thomas to the first-century gospels of the NT."

THE MURATORIAN FRAGMENT

The numbers indicate the lines of the original Latin text which suffered from being copied by one or more barely literate scribes. Translational expansions are enclosed in square brackets. Alternative translations are enclosed in parentheses.

- (1) . . . at which nevertheless he was present, and so he placed [them in his narrative].
- (2) The third book of the Gospel is that according to Luke.
- (3) Luke, the well-known physician, after the ascension of Christ,
- (4-5) when Paul had taken him with him as one zealous for the law,
- (6) composed it in his own name, according to [the general] belief. Yet he himself had not
- (7) seen the Lord in the flesh; and therefore, as he was able to ascertain events,
- (8) so indeed he begins to tell the story from the birth of John.
- (9) The fourth of the Gospels is that of John, [one] of the disciples.
- (10) To his fellow disciples and bishops, who had been urging him [to write],
- (11) he said, 'Fast with me from today for three days, and what
- (12) will be revealed to each one,
- (13) let us tell it to one another.' In the same night it was revealed
- (14) to Andrew, [one] of the apostles,
- (15-16) that John should write down all things in his own name while all of them should review it. And so, though various
- (17) elements may be taught in the individual books of the Gospels,
- (18-19) nevertheless this makes no difference to the faith of the believers, since by the one sovereign Spirit all things
- (20) have been declared in all [the Gospels]: concerning the
- (21) nativity, concerning the passion, concerning the resurrection,
- (22) concerning life with his disciples,
- (23) and concerning his twofold coming;
- (24) the first in lowliness when he was despised, which has taken place,
- (25) the second glorious 'n royal power,
- (26) which is still in the future. What
- (27) marvel is it, then, if John so consistently
- (28) mentions these particular points also in his Epistles,
- (29) saying about himself: 'What we have seen with our eyes
- (30) and heard with our ears and our hands
- (31) have handled, these things we have written to you'?
- (32) For in this way he professes [himself] to be not only an eye-witness and hearer,
- (33) but also a writer of all the marvelous deeds of the Lord, in their order.
- (34) Moreover, the Acts of all the apostles
- (35) were written in one book. For 'most excellent Theophilus' Luke compiled
- (36) the individual events that took place in his presence --
- (37) as he plainly shows by omitting the martyrdom of Peter
- (38) as well as the departure of Paul from the city [of Rome]
- (39) when he journeyed to Spain. As for the Epistles of

(40-41) Paul, they themselves make clear to those desiring to understand, which ones [they are], from what place, or for what reason they were sent.

(42) First of all, to the Corinthians, prohibiting their heretical schisms;

(43) next, to the Galatians, against circumcision;

(44-46) then to the Romans he wrote at length, explaining the order (or, plan) of the Scriptures, and also that Christ is their principle (or, main theme). It is necessary

(47) for us to discuss these one by one, since the blessed

(48) apostle Paul himself, following the example of his predecessor

(49-50) John, writes by name to only seven churches in the following sequence: to the Corinthians

(51) first, to the Ephesians second, to the Philippians third,

(52) to the Colossians fourth, to the Galatians fifth,

(53) to the Thessalonians sixth, to the Romans

(54-55) seventh. It is true that he writes once more to the Corinthians and to the Thessalonians for the sake of admonition,

(56-57) yet it is clearly recognizable that there is one Church spread throughout the whole extent of the earth. For John also in the

(58) Apocalypse, though he writes to seven churches,

(59-61) nevertheless speaks to all. [Paul also wrote] out of affection and love, one to Philemon, one to Titus, and two to Timothy; and these are held sacred

(62-63) in the esteem of the Church catholic for the regulation of ecclesiastical discipline. There is current also [an epistle] to

(64) the Laodiceans, [and] another to the Alexandrians, [both] forged in Paul's

(65) name to [further] the heresy of Marcion, and several others

(66) which cannot be received into the catholic church

(67) -- for it is not fitting that gall be mixed with honey.

(68-69) Moreover, the Epistle of Jude and two of the above-mentioned (or, bearing the name of) John are counted (or, used) in the catholic [Church]; and [the book of] Wisdom,

(70) written by the friends of Solomon in his honor.

(71) We receive only the Apocalypses of John and Peter,

(72) though some of us are not willing that the latter be read in church.

(73) But Hermas wrote the Shepherd

(74) very recently, in our times, in the city of Rome,

(75) while bishop Pius, his brother was occupying the [episcopal] chair

(76) of the church of the city of Rome.

(77) And therefore it ought indeed to be read; but

(78) it cannot be read publicly to the people in church either among

(79) the prophets, whose number is complete, or among

(80) the apostles, for it is after [their] time.

(81) But we accept nothing whatever of Arsinous or Valentinus or Miltiades,

(82) who also composed

(83) a new book of psalms for Marcion,

(84-85) together with Basilides, the Asian founder of the Cataphrygians . . .