The Authenticity of the Gospels

The first four books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are called the Gospels, meaning good news--good news about Jesus. Traditionally the Gospels are believed to be authentic eyewitness accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, written by Matthew and John, who were two of Jesus’ twelve disciples and thus eyewitnesses, and by Mark and Luke, who were not among Jesus’ twelve disciples, but were among the first generation of Christ followers, contemporaries of that time who had access to the eyewitnesses.

In contrast, modern critical scholars believe that the present Gospels are really the mythological creations of the Christian community, having been altered freely to meet various life situations and needs. Maurice Bucaille concludes, after looking at the findings of critical scholars, “When we read the Gospels we can no longer be at all sure that we are reading Jesus’ word.”35 He also states, “We do not in fact have an eyewitness account from the life of Jesus, contrary to what many Christians imagine.”36 He bases these bold assertions on the supposedly scientific findings of modern scholars in the field of source criticism and form criticism.

*Summary of Source and Form Criticism*

Source criticism attempts to identify the sources that were used in writing the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Bucaille, p. 74.
2. Ibid., p. 12.

Gospels and to show what degree of literary dependence there was between the Gospels. According to the Two-Source Theory, the Gospel of Mark was written first, and Matthew and Luke were based on Mark and another source called Q, which no longer exists.37 Form Criticism, which generally accepted Source Criticism as far as it went, sought to push the question of Gospel origins behind the written sources into the oral period.38 According to form critics, oral tradition first existed as brief rounded units (pericopes) circulating orally in the Christian community. They believe that the early Christian Church not only transmitted the accounts of the words and deeds of Jesus, but also molded and changed the tradition to fit its own changing perspectives and needs.39 In response, it can be shown that the tradition was accurately preserved prior to the written Gospels and that each Gospel was actually written by an eyewitness or based on eyewitness testimony.

*Tradition Accurately Preserved Prior to the Written Gospels*

Prior to the Gospels being written, there was a period of time in which the traditions about the life and teachings of Jesus were passed down orally. This period of time was anywhere from 20 to 70 years, depending on which Gospel you are talking about and depending on whether conservative or liberal dates are used for the writing of the Gospels.40 There are at least three reasons which suggest that the oral tradition was accurately preserved during this interval.

First, the eyewitnesses would not have allowed the traditions to be altered. The Apostles, who had seen and heard almost everything Jesus said and did during his public ministry, were alive during this time, as well as thousands of others from the various crowds who had witnessed his miracles and heard his teachings. Would all of these witnesses sit silently by while the Church tampered with the accounts of Christ’s life? It

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1. Robert L. Thomas, editor and Stanley N. Gundry, associate editor, “Source Criticism,” in A Harmony of the Gospels, Chicago: Moody Press, 1978, pp. 274-275.
2. Thomas and Gundry, “Form Criticism,” in A Harmony of the Gospels, p. 281.
3. Ibid., pp. 281-282.
4. Thomas and Gundry, pp. 61,64,67,68; John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament, Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985, pp. 16,99,199,267.

seems unthinkable that the Apostles would have failed to exercise a role as tradition bearers to prevent the Church from altering the traditions about Jesus.41 It is even more unthinkable that the Apostles themselves would have altered the traditions because they would not have died for the message they proclaimed (as all but one of them did) if they knew that message was largely an invention of their own minds.

Second, a tradition-altering church would never have come into existence. As stated in Thomas and Gundry’s Harmony of the Gospels, it was gospel history that created the community, not vice versa. If early Christian faith created the gospel record, as the critics claim, then what created Christian faith?42 The Christian communities were groups of people who had “received” Christian traditions, and had believed them to be true and on the basis of them had made personal commitments to Christ. They did not change and alter the traditions to suit their own needs, but they received and believed the traditions, and in doing so found that their deepest spiritual needs were in fact met.

Third, the time was not adequate for the community to develop its own tradition. According to the liberal theory, the Christian community altered the traditions about Jesus to suit its needs according to the life situations it found itself in. Thus, over a period of time, the oral tradition was transformed into a mythological creation of the Church. But surely such a process would take time. According to McGinley’s study in Form Criticism of the Synoptic Healing Narratives, the shortest known time for such development of tradition is 100 years, and in other cases it took 200 to 400 years.43 Yet form critics, based on their own dates for the writing of the Gospels (70 A.D. to 100A.D.) allow only 40 to 70 years for such a tradition to develop. It appears that form criticism overlooks the length of time necessary to create folk lore and legend.44

Some object that oral transmission of tradition over such a period is not capable of a high degree of accuracy. In general, liberal scholars show a skeptical attitude towards oral tradition. Some, such as Vincent Taylor, have conducted classroom

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1. Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, 3rd edition, Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1970, p. 228.
2. Thomas and Gundry, p. 284.
3. Cited in “Syllabus for the Beginnings of the Gospel,” Denver Seminary, 1984, p. 24
4. Ibid., p. 24.

experiments which supposedly show the inherent inaccuracies of oral transmission. But, as Guthrie points out, to be valid the experiment would have to be conducted among students whose mental processes were thoroughly conditioned by oral transmission processes.45 Close examination of the Jewish oral tradition by such men as B. Gerhardsson and H. Riesenfeld have shown that Jewish rabbis taught their material in set forms and vocabulary which the students were expected to memorize. Since Jesus and his Apostles were Jews, it is likely that they followed a similar practice. A study of the place of memory in the transmission of ancient traditions shows a far greater measure of agreement than people generally recognize.46

*Gospels Written By Eyewitnesses or Based on Eyewitness Testimony*

Not only was the gospel tradition accurately preserved prior to the written Gospels, but each of the four New Testament Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) were written by eyewitnesses or based on eyewitness testimony. Liberal critical scholars challenge this point, claiming that none of four Gospels were written by the man traditionally ascribed to it and that none of the Gospels truly represent an authentic eyewitness account.

In response, it can be argued that the external testimony of the early church fathers (church leaders in the first few centuries of church history) strongly supports traditional authorship of the gospels by those whose names they bear (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Matthew was one of the 12 disciples of Jesus who traveled with him and witnessed what he said and did. Many early church fathers cite Matthew as the author of the Gospel of Matthew, including Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen.47 Mark was not one of the Twelve, but has traditionally been assumed to be John Mark, who is mentioned 10 times in the New Testament, usually in connection with the Apostles Paul (as in Acts 12:25; 13:5,13; etc.) or Peter (Acts 12:12; 1 Peter 5:13).48 According to church tradition his main source was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, p. 226.
2. Ibid., pp. 222, 226.
3. Louis A. Barbieri, “Matthew,” in The Bible Knowledge Commentary, p. 15.
4. John D. Grassmick, “Mark,” in The Bible Knowledge Commentary, N.T., p. 95.

Peter, who was not only one of the Twelve, but the leader among them. This view is based on a clear statement from Papias (about 110 A.D.) and was confirmed by statements from many other early church fathers.49 Luke, who wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, also was not one of the twelve, but he is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24). He was probably a Gentile (non-Jew) and is called the “beloved physician” (Col. 4:14).50 The Muratorian Canon (170 A.D.), Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Tertullian all specifically stated that Luke was the author of the Gospel of Luke.51 From his prologue, Luke makes it very clear that he had a strong interest in writing a historically accurate account based on eyewitness testimony:

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. Therefore since *I myself have carefully investigated* everything from the beginning, it seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, *so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught* (Luke 1:1-4, NIV, italics added).

John was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus and also one of the “inner three” who were closest to Jesus. The first clear testimony that the Apostle John was the author came from Irenaeus about 180 A.D., who said that John wrote the Gospel and published it at Ephesus, where he lived. Since Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, and Polycarp had known the Apostle John personally, there is a direct line between Irenaeus and John with only one connecting link.52 Polycrates, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and the other later church fathers all accepted this tradition, and Eusebius was clear in saying that the Apostles Matthew and John wrote the Gospels which bear their names.53

If scholars living almost two thousand years later wish to dismiss the strong testimony of these early scholars who lived within 300 years after from the time of writing, they should have some strong and irrefutable reasons for doing so. Some argue \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Ibid., p. 95.
2. Thomas and Gundry, “Form Criticism,” in A Harmony of the Gospels, p. 284.
3. Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, pp. 69-70.
4. Thomas and Gundry, “Criticism of the Gospel of John,” in Harmony of the Gospels, p. 299.
5. Edwin Blum, “John,” in The Bible Knowledge Commentary, N.T., p. 267.

against traditional authorship because none of the presumed authors--Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, identify themselves as the author within the text. But as McDowell and Gilcrest point out, the manuscripts were so well accepted as being authoritative, they did not need the author’s names placed on them. Not signing the Gospel was the writer’s way of not detracting from the purpose of making Jesus Christ the central issue.54 In fact, the lack of an autograph actually adds to the gospel’s claim of authenticity rather than taking away from it since most of the “fake gospels” did explicitly claim authorship by a particular apostle (falsely so, such as Peter, Thomas, Barnabas, etc.),55 but none of the gospels judged by the Church to be the most authentic contained an explicit claim of authorship within the text. Where other evidence is lacking or contrary, an autograph does not help. Where external evidence is sufficiently strong, an autograph is unnecessary.

Critics of the gospels demonstrate their inconsistency by sometimes arguing against the authenticity of the gospels by saying they are too similar, and sometimes by saying they are too different. For example, Muslim apologist Ahmed Deedat accuses the author of the Gospel of Matthew for plagiarism for copying from Mark, and quotes Christian scholar J.B. Philips as saying “He [Matthew] has used Mark’s Gospel freely.” Deedat comments:

which in the language of the school-teacher -- “has been copying WHOLESALE from Mark!” Yet the Christians call this wholesale plagiarism the Word of God?56

In response, it can be said that such “copying” should not be called plagiarism because we should not impose our modern exacting standards of footnoting, etc. to ancient writers

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1. McDowell and Gilcrest, The Islam Debate, p. 161.
2. These other gospels arose after the four accepted gospels, often as an expression of a new heresy (false teaching). The Gospel of Peter was not found in use until 190 A.D. and was eventually identified as belonging to a heresy held by a man named Marciannus (Guthrie, p. 679). The Gospel of Thomas was produced by the Gnostics, a second century heretical group which was a Greek perversion of Christianity emphasizing salvation through secret knowledge (Guthrie, p. 152). The Gospel of Barnabas, based on lack of manuscript evidence and internal clues, was a medieval forgery, probably written by a convert from Christianity to Islam (David Sox, The Gospel of Barnabas, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984, pp.25-31). These and other imitations were frequently attributed to an apostolic author in the body of the text, evidently because an anonymous production was felt to be inadequate (Guthrie, p. 33).
3. Deedat, Is the Bible God’s Word?, p. 29.

who operated under a different set of standards. It should also be pointed out that Marcan Priority (the idea that Mark wrote first and that the other gospel writers copied from him)

is only a theory, and some scholars, such as Thomas and Gundy, oppose it, advocating instead the view, upheld by tradition, that Matthew wrote first.57 According to this view, none of the Gospel writers copied each other. Rather they drew on a common oral tradition which could be regarded as a kind of common knowledge (at that time and within the Church). Each of the four gospel writers drew upon this same source of common knowledge resulting in many similarities, but this can hardly be called plagiarism.

While Deedat complains that Matthew copies Mark, Bucaille argues that Luke has too much unique material:

The various narrations in Luke show important differences from his predecessors . . . O. Culman . . . cites descriptions in Luke’s Gospel that are not to be found anywhere else. Nor are they on points of detail.58

Bucaille seems to assume that if an event is recorded in only one gospel its historical credibility is automatically suspect. But this attitude overlooks the fact that one of the values of having more than one gospel is that each contains some unique material. About eight chapters of Luke’s Gospel (9:51-18:14) contain unique material. The reason is that these chapters focus on the Perean ministry of Jesus, whereas the Gospel of Mark is a rapid survey focusing mostly on the Galilean ministry, the Gospel of John deals almost exclusively with the Jerusalem ministry, and the Gospel of Matthew groups the history (mostly from Galilee) around the great discourses or teaching sessions of Christ.59 The Gospels supplement each other very well, and the unique material of each is important in giving us a complete picture of Christ’s ministry. Thus we see that critics of the Bible are determined to criticize it in any way they can. If the gospels contain unique material, it is considered suspect for being unsubstantiated. But when they contain common material, then the writers are accused of plagiarism. What do the critics want--the gospels to be

the same or different? They can’t have it both ways!

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1. Thomas and Gundry, pp. 274-279.
2. Bucaille, p. 67.
3. Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, vol. II, McLean, Virginia: MacDonald Publishing Co., reprinted from 1886 original, p. 127.

Another example of the subjective and biased nature of the criticisms against the Bible comes in the treatment of John chapter 21 by the critics. In this chapter (verse 24) “the disciple whom Jesus loved” identifies himself as the author of the gospel. Internal evidence strongly suggests that “the disciple whom Jesus loved”60 is the Apostle John,61 and therefore chapter 21 identifies the Apostle John as the author of the gospel. Liberal scholars dismiss the argument that this beloved disciple was the author by attributing John 21 to the work of a later editor. Bucaille cites O. Culmann, who thinks chapter 21 is a later addition which was probably the work of a “disciple who may well have made slight alterations to the main body of the Gospel.”62 But what evidence is there for such an assertion? Is there any textual evidence? No--Guthrie says, “There is no evidence that this statement [John 21:24] was not an original part of the Gospel and it must therefore be regarded as a valuable witness on the matter of authorship.”63 Critics dismiss it only on the basis of subjective reasoning, saying, for example, that chapter 21 is anti-climatic after the great conclusion of chapter 20, and must therefore have been written by a later anonymous writer. But without any linguistic or textual evidence to support such a notion the argument is inconclusive. Although John 21 could be regarded as a kind of appendix, that doesn’t mean it was written by a different person at a different time. Other

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1. This designation doesn’t imply that Jesus only loved this disciple, for he loved all the disciples (John 13:1). Nor does it imply a homosexual relationship, for this is identified in scripture as a sin (1 Cor. 6:9-11) and the scripture clearly indicates that Jesus was pure from sin (Hebrews 4:15-16).
2. The beloved disciple was one of the Twelve disciples, for he was present at the Last Supper, which was for only Jesus and his Twelve disciples (Mark 14:17; John 13:23). The disciple whom Jesus loved is distinguished from Peter, but is often mentioned in close connection with Peter (John 13:23-24; 21:20). Because of his close relationship with Jesus and Peter, it is likely that he belongs to the inner circle of three disciples (Peter, James, and John) whom Jesus selected out of the Twelve to accompany him on several special occasions (Mark 5:37-38; 9:2-3; 14:33). The disciple whom Jesus loved could not have been James, for he died in 44 A.D., as recorded in Acts 12:2, long before the Gospel of John was written. We have already shown that he was not Peter. So he must have been John (Blum, p. 267). This conclusion is further supported by the fact that John’s name is not mentioned in the Gospel of John although he is mentioned by name 20 times in the other Gospels (Guthrie, p. 246). This means John must be designated in a different way in the Gospel of John, i.e. by the title “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”
3. Bucaille, p. 69.
4. Guthrie, p. 243.

great books of Scripture also have appendixes after reaching a grand climax (e.g. Romans 16 after Romans 15:33).64 Guthrie comments:

Advocates of theories of authorship which deny an eyewitness author treat the clear testimony of this verse [John 21:24] as a redactional device [i.e. the work of a later editor]. . . [This] is an unsatisfactory method of dealing with the internal evidence. By such a method any embarrassing evidence can be disposed of. Unless there are convincing grounds for maintaining a contrary opinion (and they are yet to be produced) the words

of verse 24 must be taken with full seriousness as an indication of an author who claims to be an eyewitness.65

Further discussion on the topic of the authorship of the Gospels is beyond the scope of this book, but other more detailed discussions of the evidence are available for the interested reader.66

One scholar who became convinced of the authenticity of the gospels as eyewitness accounts even though he originally held to the liberal view is Dr. John A. T. Robinson, lecturer at Trinity College in Cambridge. As “little more than a theological he decided to investigate the issue of the authorship of the New Testament. He concluded, to his own surprise, that the New Testament is the work of the apostles themselves or of contemporaries who worked closely with them.67