

3. Why trust the gospel accounts? Transmission and corroboration

Introduction

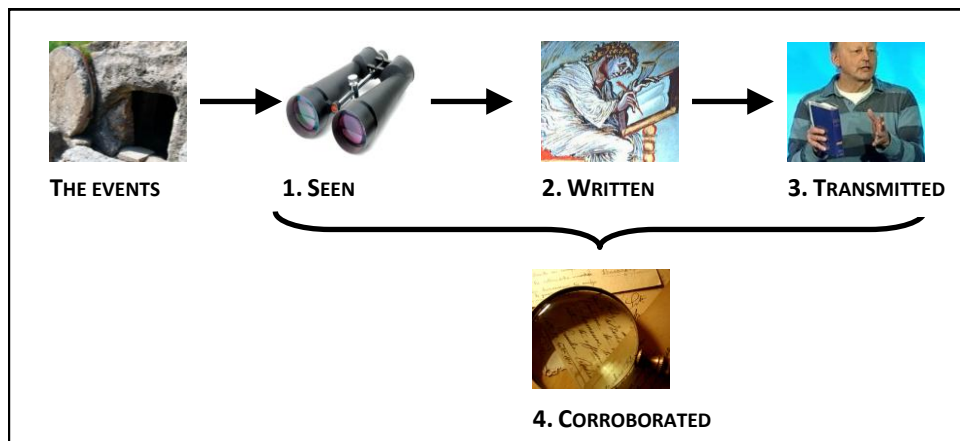
Let me welcome you to Immanuel Church – particularly if you’re new with us.

The aim of these three sessions is simply to set out some of the many reasons why we should have confidence in the truthfulness of the Bible. We hope they will be useful to people who are already Christians – and helpful to those sceptical about the Christian faith or just looking in from the outside.

As we begin let me read a verse from the Bible – which is also a prayer. This would be a good prayer for all of us, whether we are Christians (and therefore praying people) or whether we come to the Bible with a whole bunch of questions and scepticism:

Psalm 119:18, “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.” Amen.

Two weeks ago we looked at what the so-called **New Atheists say about the Bible**. We listened to Richard Dawkins and Philip Pullman claim that the Bible is essentially untrustworthy. In this diagram we’ll see the process we’re working through in response to their claims:



Last week we thought about stages 1 and 2:

Stage 1: The gospel events were public events that were seen by eyewitnesses. And eyewitness testimony is powerful and important – both historians and regular people in everyday life listen to and act on eyewitness testimony.

Stage 2: The eyewitnesses’ testimony was written down. It was recorded relatively quickly. And an enormous emphasis was placed by the Bible writers on truth – finding out the truth and recording it carefully. They had an agenda in writing – they want us to believe in Jesus. But we saw that we all have an agenda. Indeed, “should I trust the gospels?” is not the only question we should ask. We should also ask “Do I trust myself to read the Bible fairly?”

This week we think about stages 3 and 4: we’ll see how the gospel documents have been reliably transmitted to us. And how the gospels are corroborated, both within the Bible and from outside.

3. The gospels have been reliably transmitted to us.

Here's the question before us: Do we have now what they wrote down back then? Or has there been a process of Chinese Whispers and distortion as the text of the gospels has been passed down to us over nearly 2,000 years?

We're not now thinking about the gap in time between the Gospel events occurring and being written down. We're thinking about the gap between the first manuscripts of the New Testament being written and the texts that we now possess and call "The Bible."

Before we look at the story of the NT manuscripts let's look at the surviving manuscripts of some other ancient texts:

(a) Comparison with other ancient texts

CLASSICAL TEXTS:				
<u>Josephus, Jewish War</u> (written c.70AD)				
Surviving copies?	2 sets of excerpts and 9 complete mss.			
From when?	Small portion is 5th century Latin translation. Remaining manuscripts from 10th century.			
<u>Tacitus, Annals of Imperial Rome</u> (117AD)				
Surviving copies?	At least 16 books originally written. Missing: all of books 7-10, parts of books 5, 6, 11 and 16 are missing. Surviving: 1 mss for Annals 1-6 and 1 mss for Annals 11-16			
From when?	850AD (1-6) and 1050AD (for 11-16)			
<u>Virgil</u>	<u>Livy</u>	<u>Horace</u>	<u>(Most) Plato</u>	<u>Euripedes</u>
350	500	900	1300	1600
years after first writing				

Look at the statistics for Josephus and Tacitus firstly. Notice that we few surviving manuscripts and that the manuscripts we do have were written centuries after the first manuscripts.

Look at the statistics of some other classical writers (Virgil the poet, Livy the ancient historian, Horace the poet, Plato the philosopher, Euripedes the dramatist). Notice simply the huge period of time between their works first being written down and the date of the earliest manuscripts which we possess.

This is normal for ancient texts. There are very few survivals of ancient literature. Most texts in the ancient world were written on papyrus. It falls to bits unless it is kept somewhere incredibly dry (like north Africa).

Yet, these manuscripts are regarded by historians of the ancient world as basically reliable.

(b) The New Testament documents

The New Testament was written in Greek. It was written in a particular form of Greek known as *koine* or common Greek. They were probably written on papyrus.

We do not possess the first or original manuscripts that the NT writers composed. Those documents are known as the *autographs*. In God's providence we don't possess them.

What we do possess is a huge number of copies, translations and quotations of those original manuscripts. We're going to see just a little bit of the story of the NT manuscripts. This is a bit nerdy and technical! But it's actually an amazing – and true – story.

Early Greek manuscripts containing some or all of the NT (totaling c.5,000)

Divided into the Alexandrian, Western and Byzantine “families” of texts

- The Papyri (c.100) mainly 2nd-4th centuries. Including:
 - *Chester Beatty papyri*
 - *Rylands fragment* (P52) papyri containing John 18:31-33, 37-38. From Egypt, c.100AD.
- Uncial manuscripts (c.300). Parchment. From 4th-10th centuries. Including:
 - *Codex Sinaiticus*. Written in 4th century. Complete NT
 - *Codex Alexandrinus*. Written in 5th century. Almost complete NT
 - *Codex Vaticanus*. Written in 4th century. Complete NT
- Minuscule manuscripts (c.2800). From 9th century and later.
- Lectionaries (2000). Fragments from 6th century. Complete mss from 8th century onwards.

Early translations or “versions”

- Into Coptic, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Persian, Slavonic, Frankish
- E.g. Coptic Sahidic dialect NT from 3rd century and Bohairic dialect John’s gospel from 4th century

Quotations of NT in the early church Fathers

- E.g. Ambrose of Caesarea: 520AD commentary on Revelation containing entire Gk text
- All died before 450AD: Athanasius, Augustine, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, Eusebius the historian, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus bishop of Lyons, Jerome etc.

The early Greek manuscripts each contain either some or all of the NT. There are three main “families” of manuscripts: Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine.¹

These include around 100 very early texts written on papyrus and known as *The papyri*. They include the Chester Beatty papyrus which you can view in Dublin.

Also, here we note the un-romantically named P52 which lives in Manchester. It’s also called the Rylands or St John’s fragment. It’s a tiny piece from a papyrus codex and it measures just 9cm by 6cm. The front (recto) contains parts of seven lines from John 18:31–33. The back (verso) contains parts of seven lines from John 18:37–38. You can go and see it! (See picture below).



It was written no later than 150 AD and almost certainly much nearer 100AD. It was found in Egypt. It would have taken a little time for manuscripts to get to Egypt from Ephesus (where John’s gospel was probably written). This pushes back the date of the gospel’s first writing.

¹ The text families:

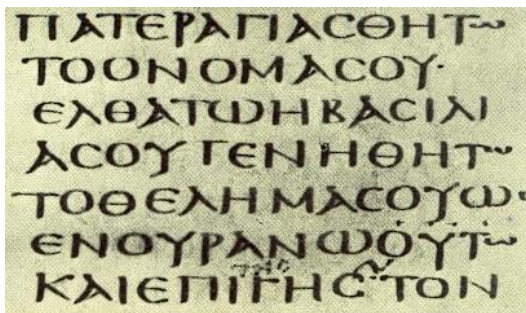
- Alexandrian: from North Africa. Contains P66 and P75 from late C2nd and Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus from mid C4th.
- Western text: from Italy, Gaul, as well as North Africa. From second century.
- Byzantine texts: from Constantinople. From later.

The likes of Westcott and others have strongly disliked the Byzantine text, perhaps unreasonably so. Others such as John Wenham think it has a lot going for it.

There are around 300 **uncial manuscripts**. “Uncial” describes the fact that they were written in capital letters. They are on parchments and date from the 4th to 10th centuries.

They include the Codex Sinaiticus – found at the monastery at Mt Sinai by Tischendorf in 1844. It was copied down in the 4th century. It’s a complete NT, plus some of the Old Testament, and some non-apostolic Christian writings. You can see most of it in the British Museum.

This picture is an extract from it. Its Luke 11:2 – the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer, in the version which Jesus gives us in Luke:



“Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, etc.”
Πάτερ, ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου· ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου·

Additionally there are about 2,800 **minuscule manuscripts**. They are written in a different style of lettering from a little bit later on. They date from the 9th century and later. (It’s worth noting in passing that later doesn’t necessarily mean less reliable. In fact, a 12th century minuscule may be half as many copies away from the originals as an 8th century uncial manuscript.

There are **Lectionaries** – about 2,000 of them. They are collections of set Bible readings for different days. We have NT fragments from the 6th century and complete manuscripts from the 8th century and later.

There are also very early **translations or “versions”** of the NT. It was translated quickly into Coptic, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Persian, Slavonic, Frankish.

Christian people understand why: the answer is “Mission!” Christians have always wanted to obey Jesus’ command to take the Gospel to all nations, to every tribe and tongue under heaven.²

There are also **citations and quotations in of the NT in the writings of the early church Fathers**. These men quote the NT so extensively that you could almost reconstruct the entire NT from their writings without any NT manuscripts. For example, Ambrose of Caesarea in about 520AD writes a commentary on Revelation which contains the entire Greek text of that Bible book.

² These include:

- Latin: this includes the Old Latin (Itala) and also the Vulgate (by Jerome) which remains the Roman Catholic Bible to this day.
- Syriac: a language like Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus. It includes the Diatessaron (“through the four”), which is a gospel harmony.
- Coptic or Egyptian: it includes the Sahidic dialect NT from the 3rd century, and the Bohairic dialect John’s gospel from the 4th century.
- Armenian and Georgian: the NT was probably translated in the 5th century, although the earliest surviving MSS are from the 9th century.

(c) So what? It is possible to recover the original text, even without the autographs

It is possible to recover the original text of the NT – even though we don't have the autographs.

We have a far better and more reliable text of the NT than we do of any other ancient work. We can be confident that in virtually everything we are holding in our hands the same Bible books that were first written. According to NT scholar Craig Blomberg between 97-99% of the NT text is not in any doubt. You can look at those 5,000 Greek manuscripts – plus all the rest – and work out the original wording with almost complete certainty.

How did happen? Simply, the manuscripts were copied, and copied, and copied, and copied. This process happened by hand – there were no scanners or photocopiers!

We may think that was a recipe for disaster. And modern textual scholars are very good at working out where just occasionally a copyist made a mistake. That's in the 1-3% area of the NT text, where there are some questions about what was original. (That's not a problem for Christian people, by the way. Firstly, there are no key doctrines in doubt at all in that handful of verses. Secondly, we believe in the divine inspiration of the originals – of the autographs).

But the copyists overall were astonishingly reliable. Christian people obviously believe that the hand of God was in this process, preserving the text of the Bible. And it is truly amazing. Here's a little illustration, drawn actually from the Old Testament manuscripts: the prophet Isaiah wrote in about 700BC. The earliest manuscripts of Isaiah dated from the Masoretic text of 1,000AD – that's a gap of more than 1,500 years. Did all those copyists really get it right over those years? Then in the 1940s the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. They included a text of Isaiah which probably dates from around 100BC. The Masoretic copy from 1,000 years later contained three words that were spelled differently.

That's OT not NT. And it's a Jewish scribal process we're talking about, not Christian. But that is extraordinary and it should humble our modern pride.

(d) What about the differences between the manuscripts?

You can see them footnoted in your Bible. Their existence is not surprising. The Gutenberg press wasn't invented until 1440. The Bible was copied by hand.

It's the job of scholars doing "textual criticism" or "lower criticism" to try and understand that 1-3% area of uncertainty. (You could imagine all these texts as being related to each other like different people in a family tree. They compare different branches with the tree and apply a few mainly commonsense rules to work out how differences may have emerged).

Most differences are individual letters of the alphabet that are different. There are a few words that differ between manuscripts and some incidental details. No Christian doctrine or historical event is in question.

There are only two passages in the NT over which there is any doubt at all:

- John 8:1-11, the woman caught in adultery
- Mark 16:9-20, the longer ending of Mark's gospel

We don't have time to say much here. But in summary, these passages were probably not in the originals.

- John 8:1-11 is in none of the oldest and best manuscripts, though it does fit with Jesus' character and teaching.
- Mark 16:9-20 is not contained in two of the oldest and most reliable complete copies of the Gospel (Codexes Sinaiticus and Vaticanus). Plus, the style and theology are very different to the rest of Mark's gospel.

4. The gospels are corroborated within the Bible and externally.

(a) Corroboration from outside the Bible

Let's think about some external corroboration. That is, data from OUTSIDE the Bible that helps shed light on and verify what we read IN the Bible. We don't attach vast amounts of weight to such data. But it's helpful...

- **Archaeology**

Craig Blomberg writes: "In a world without photography or tape recorders, the vast majority of the deeds and sayings of Jesus disappeared without any physical remains." (C. Blomberg, *Jesus and the gospels*, p367)

After all, Jesus and the early church did not make coins or build temples. Mainly, therefore, archaeology simply helps us understand the world in which Jesus and the disciples taught. Nevertheless, there are specific archaeological finds that back up details in the gospels. These include: "the synagogue in Capernaum, possibly Peter's home there, Jacob's well at Sychar where Jesus met with the Samaritan woman, the pool of Bethesda with its five porticoes near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, the pool of Siloam in Jerusalem..."

(Here's a picture of the pool at Bethesda)



"Some of the finds are quite recent. Not until 1961 was inscriptional evidence unearthed (at Caesarea Maritima) corroborating Pilate as prefect of Judea during Tiberius' reign. In 1968 an ossuary (bone box) of a crucified man named Johanan confirmed for the first time that nails could be driven through the feet of anklebones of executed victims... In 1990, the tomb of what seems likely to be the high-priest Caiaphas was first discovered." (Blomberg, *Jesus and the gospels*, p367)

(Here's a picture of the Pilate inscription)



- **Non-Christian Jewish writers**

Various sources speak critically of Jesus and his followers, but confirm some details as they do. Most important is the Roman Jewish historian Josephus. He speaks of Jesus as "the one called Christ."

- **Non-Christian Roman writers**

Just occasionally someone will say “Jesus never existed.” No-one with a shred of integrity can think that. Undoubtedly that he did – even without appealing to Christian evidence. For a start there is some evidence from non-Christian Roman writers.

The 3rd century historian Julian Africanus cites the 1st century historian Thallus who referred to the darkness that occurred at the time of the crucifixion. He attributed it to an eclipse.

In the early 2nd century Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor Trajan seeking advice about these Christians who met and who sang hymns “to Christ as if to a god.” He knew Jesus existed. He understood the claims Christians made about him.

In the early 2nd century Suetonius writes of the expulsion of the Jews and of Jewish Christians from Rome under Claudius. And he speaks about one “Chrestus” – probably meaning Christ.

Most important of all Tacitus (Annals 15:44) wrote that Christians received their name from “Christ who had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius.” All those details match the NT perfectly.

(b) Corroboration from within the Bible

The rest of the NT confirms various details that are given within the gospels. The whole NT coheres, despite its diversity. Most tellingly of all, the NT as a whole fits together with the OT; the unity of Scripture is a powerful argument. We note here the fulfilment of OT prophecy as a powerful proof of the Bible’s trustworthiness.

We’ve no time to say any more on that now.

5. Conclusion

We’ve seen that the “story” of the trustworthiness of the Gospels is **a story well worth telling.**

(a) A story well worth telling

Some of our friends have big questions about the trustworthiness of the Bible – particularly those who have a “modernist” mindset (this is not so much a question with post-moderns). We can share that story with them.

And quite a lot of people are interested in history and in origins (see the popularity of something like the History channel, of finding your ancestors, etc.). We can share that story with them.

Because there’s a great true story here for us to tell. We have every reason to trust what the NT writers wrote. (And there are some great resources available to answer friend’s questions and objections).

(b) A caution

But let me offer a word of caution as we close: **we will never argue anyone to faith in Christ by weight of argument.** If we’re Christian people we need to understand how it is that we should speak with non-Christian friends about this evidence.

I spent quite a while last year and earlier this year reading the Bible with a non-Christian friend. He had big questions, he was influenced by the arguments of the new atheists, not least to do with the Bible. I shared some of his questions with a couple of friends. Their answers to his questions were really interesting. They

showed completely different approaches to engaging with unbelievers. Without realising it they embodied entirely different schools of apologetics.

Answer 1: “Answer him from personal experience – that can’t be refuted.” There’s a place for experience and testimony, for saying “taste and see that the Lord is good.”

But taken to its extreme you end up doing apologetics by way of **Fideism**. (It’s closely associated with Karl Barth. The idea behind it is that God is so great that you cannot talk about him with an unbeliever at all. All you can do is appeal to your personal testimony. You could sum it up rather rudely as: “You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.” And, of course, it is easily challenged: “that’s nice for you – it’s just not true for me.”

Answer 2: “Just answer all his questions.” There’s a place for answering the questions of unbelieving friends. Usually, it is discourteous not to answer their questions. We want to give evidence.

But taken to an unhealthy extreme you end up doing apologetics by way of **Evidentialism**. We might associate this with Josh McDowell (*Evidence that demands a verdict*), and to some extent more recently with Lee Strobel (*Case for Christ*). What’s the danger here? We may think that unbelievers are in an intellectual neutral zone, and if I come up with enough facts then they will be persuaded to become Christians.

Let me briefly describe *another approach - number 3*: It’s sometimes called **Presuppositionalism**. It assumes that all people have a knowledge of God, but that we suppress it because of sin. It takes sin very seriously, particularly the effects of sin on the mind. (Because when we’re talking with an unbeliever we are speaking with someone of whom Romans 1:18ff is true).

Presuppositionalism aims to show the goodness and the truthfulness of a Christian position, and the folly and inconsistency of a non-Christian position. And, how an unbeliever relies on the Christian worldview to be true without ever acknowledging it.

We don’t have time to say any more about that now. Presuppositionalism is something we all do without realising it. Though it is something worth thinking about. (Two key names here are Cornelius Van Til and John Frame).

For now at the end of these sessions that have been very heavy on “facts” and “evidence” it’s appropriate to remember the dangers of evidentialism. So, let’s give evidence when asked for. But remember that unbelievers are not morally neutral super-sleuths who will go wherever the evidence leads.³

(c) An encouragement: only God can persuade someone to trust His Word.

Listen to these wise words from John Calvin’s Institutes...

“For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed with the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.”

(Calvin, Institutes, 1.7.4).

“Unless this certainty, higher and stronger than any human judgement, be present, it will be vain to fortify the authority of Scripture by arguments, to establish it by common agreement of the church, or to confirm it with other helps. For unless this foundation is laid, its authority will always remain in doubt. Conversely,

³ On different approaches to apologetics see:

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/03/11/fides-quaerens-intellectum-what-is-presuppositionalism/>

once we have embraced it devoutly as its dignity deserves, and have recognised it to be above the common sort of things, those arguments – not strong enough before to engraft and fix the certainty of Scripture in our minds – become very useful aids.”

(Calvin, Institutes, 1.8.1)

Notice what Calvin says? Only God himself can testify that the Bible comes from God. “God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word.” We believe that the Bible is God’s Word because God tells us it is His Word.

Yes, that is a circular argument. Any appeal to ultimate authority has to be circular. But other proofs are not and cannot be determinative in persuading us that the Bible is God’s Word.

And only God can open up blind eyes to hear Scripture as none other than the true, powerful and good Word of God. The inward testimony of the Spirit is what we pray for. We pray that the same Spirit who authored Scripture will work inside and convince and convict a person that the Bible is God’s Word.

So we pray for our friends. And we put Scripture in their hands. We can say: “Read this – historians treat it as a reliable source of information. Why do you want verification for Jesus from elsewhere? Is it because you want to evade the claims of Christ as revealed in the Bible. But pick it up and read it. Because God the Spirit wields it like a sword. And he will use that sword either to drive you even further from Christ or to bring you to know and love his Son.”

And Calvin helpfully goes on to remind us that traditional apologetics - the sorts of things of which we’ve been speaking these last couple of weeks – are really for Christians. Once you have devoutly embraced Scripture as the Word of God then these other “arguments” become “very useful aids.” Useful, and no more.

Let’s allow God’s Word to conclude for us:

1 Corinthians 2:14, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Appendix: Bishop J.C. Ryle on the Bible

Is the Bible the Word of God? Then mind that you do not neglect it. Read it! Begin to read it this very day. What greater insult to God can a man be guilty of than to refuse to read the letter God sends him from heaven? Oh, be sure, if you will not read your Bible, you are in fearful danger of losing your soul!

Is the Bible the Word of God? Then be sure you always read it with deep reverence. Say to your soul, whenever you open the Bible, “O my soul, you are going to read a message from God!”

Is the Bible the Word of God? Then be sure you never read it without fervent prayer for the help and teaching of the Holy Spirit. Humble prayer will throw more light on your Bible than any commentary that ever was written. You will not understand it unless your heart is right. You will find it a sealed book without the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Its contents are often hidden from the wise and learned, and revealed to babes.

Is the Bible the Word of God? Then let us all resolve from this day forward to prize the Bible more. God has given us the Bible to be a light to guide us to everlasting life. Let us not neglect this precious gift. Let us read it diligently, and walk in its light.