

1. Why trust the gospel accounts? An introduction

Discuss while we wait to begin...

1. Do you believe that the Bible is given to us by God?
2. If so, why?
3. If not, why not?

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.

We'll all know people who think that the Bible is a book full of myths. It's un-historical. What's written in it is not to be trusted.

Why does that matter? Because the Christian faith and the claims of Jesus Christ are built squarely upon the Bible. If you were to destroy the credibility of the Bible, you destroy the foundation of Christian faith – there is no reason to be a Christian any more.

Just at the moment we are seeing some very high profile attacks on the Bible – from some scientists, novelists, philosophers, and politicians. Some of the most well-know come from a group who are sometimes called the New Atheists – they include the likes of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hitchens and others.

Before we try to set out the case for the trustworthiness of the Bible we're going to spend a few minutes trying to understand why it is some folk think the Bible is essentially un-trustworthy.

1. The New Atheists and the Bible

It's worth saying that the arguments of the new atheists are not very new.

Back in the 19th century some mainly German scholars wrote “lives” of Jesus; they were liberal theologians who thought they ought to remove all references to the supernatural and what they considered mythological. What was left behind was the truth. And in the 20th century the same sort of approach was adopted by the so-called “Jesus seminar.”

Let's think about two prominent critics of the Christian faith – Richard Dawkins and Philip Pullman.

Here's how **Richard Dawkins** expresses his disbelief in the Bible:

“The fact that something is written down is persuasive to people not used to asking questions like: ‘Who wrote it, and when?’ ‘How did they know what to write?’ ‘Did they, in their time, really mean what we, in our time, understand them to be saying?’ ‘Were they unbiased observers, or did they have an agenda that coloured their writing?’ Ever since the nineteenth century, scholarly

theologians have made an overwhelming case that the gospels are not reliable accounts of what happened in the history of the real world. All were written long after the death of Jesus, and also after the epistles of Paul, which mention almost none of the alleged facts of Jesus' life. All were then copied and recopied, through many different 'Chinese Whispers generations'... by fallible scribes who, in any case, had their own religious agendas." (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p118).

Dawkins expresses the issues very well. And he does so propositionally. **Philip Pullman** has the same opinion of the Bible. But he gets his message across in a different way. He writes novels; he uses stories as a medium to get his agenda across.

Most of us know Pullman the *His dark materials* trilogy. If you've got children or grandchildren they will almost certainly be reading them in school. Pullman sees himself and these novels as a deliberate riposte to the Christian writer C.S. Lewis who used the *Narnia* novels to re-tell the story of the Bible.

For Pullman, the "fall" of mankind is re-told as a fall upwards. God is a deceiving angel. Salvation is obtaining freedom from God and freedom from a wicked and inhumane church. In the quest to be "free citizens of the republic of heaven" violence and sexual promiscuity is both permitted and celebrated. (Whatever you think of the message it is extraordinary – in my opinion – that such books should be regarded as children's literature!)

If the message of *His Dark Materials* is that Christianity is BAD, the message of Pullman's more recent book is that Christianity is UNTRUE. (The great challenge for Christian people in our culture today is of course to show that the Christian faith is both *good* and *true*.)

Pullman published *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* in 2010. It is his re-telling of the gospel stories – events and teachings connected specifically with Jesus. It's highly selective in what is included or excluded. The supernatural is explained away as a fraud or a deception.

And at the heart of it is a really clever literary device: "Jesus" and "Christ" are not one man – but two brothers. Jesus is a heroic visionary and all round good bloke. He becomes a simple Jewish prophet (and nothing more). He simply wants to help the common man. He suffers a crisis of faith in the garden before the crucifixion; he wonders "Is God there?" before concluding "No, he's not."

Christ is his rather sinister twin brother who lurks in the background. Ultimately he's the one who betrays his brother. He is the one who appears as the risen Jesus. Why does he do all this? Because he's told to. Christ is recruited by a mysterious figure who gets him to observe his brother. Write down what he says and does. And then to embellish it – for the sake of the Church and to provide poor people with fake consolation in the face of troubles.

Let me read you some of the Stranger's words – which really are Pullman's words about how the Gospels came into being:

"What should have been is a better servant of the Kingdom than *what was*... There is time, and there is what is beyond time. History belongs to time, but truth belongs to what is beyond time. In writing of things as they should have been, you are letting truth into history. You are the word of God." (pp98-99)

"And when you come to assemble the history of what the world is living through now, you will add to the outward and visible events their inward and spiritual significance; so, for example, when you look down on the story as God looks down on time, you will be able to have Jesus foretell to his disciples, as it were in truth, the events to come of which, in history, he was unaware." (pp124-125)

Before betraying Jesus to death the Stranger and Christ have this exchange:

- S: If he does not come to life again, then nothing will be true. If he doesn't rise from his grave, the faith of countless millions yet unborn will die in the womb, and that is grave from which nothing will rise...
- C: But will it happen?... It's in history I want to see him rise again.
- S: Then believe.
- A: And if I can't?
- S: Then think of an orphan child, lost and cold and starving. Think of a sick man, racked with pain and fear. Think of a dying woman terrified by the coming darkness. There will be hands reaching out to comfort them and feed them and warm them... All those kindly hands and sweet voices will do their work so willingly because they know that one man died and rose again...
- C: Even if it never happened.
(pp173-174)

And after Jesus' death Christ watches the disciples. He describes them:

"[They] became transformed... as if a holy spirit had entered them. They travelled and preached, they won new converts to this faith in a risen Jesus, they even managed some healing miracles, or at least things happened that could be reported as miracles. They were full of passion and zeal. And as time passed, Christ began to hear the story changing little by little. It began with Jesus' name. At first he was Jesus, simply; but then he began to be called Jesus the Messiah, or Jesus the Christ; and later still it was simply Christ... The account of the resurrection was greatly enhanced...the stories began to weave themselves together." (pp236-237)

Do we see what Pullman is claiming? That there is a difference between truth and history. "History" is what really happened – the facts. "Truth" is what we'd have liked to have happened; stories grow and evolve and change by means of Chinese whispers. Truth is myth, but it's a myth which gives people value, which consoles them, which moves them to do good to others.

And on the back dust jacket of the book we read this statement in large gold letters: "THIS IS A STORY." Pullman doesn't explain what he means by that statement. But it's pretty clear he means two things:

- my story – it's just a story. So don't get too het up about it.
- Christians – your story is just a story too.

Pullman says the same sort of stuff as Dawkins. But he does so in a different sort of way. And if we or our friends and family begin to have doubts about the Bible at one level it's not surprising: bright people saying big things about the untrustworthiness of this Book.

2. Beginning to respond

Our aim is to see solid reasons why the story we've just heard from Dawkins and Pullman is mistaken at numbers of points. And why it is that we should trust the Gospel accounts. Why it is that we should have *certainty* and *confidence* in them.

Before we dive in let's think briefly about some preliminary sort of questions:

(a) A preliminary question: how do we know what is true?

That's one of the big questions that faces us here. How do we know what is true? And we need to know that there are different sorts of knowledge.

There's *scientific knowledge*. We are talking here about phenomena and processes that are repeatable. We're in the realm of the laboratory. The temperature at which water boils is something you can test; you can re-boil water and test its temperature. It is repeatable.

But very little of what we know is like that. How do we know what happened at the Battle of Hastings? (You can't run a replay of it. Does my mother love me? (You can't really conduct an experiment do demonstrate it). There are *other sorts of evidence* that we have rely on in order to come to certain knowledge. We do it every single day. And that's important for us as we ask the question: what really happened in New Testament times? Are the gospels are reliable record of those events back then?

(b) A practical question: why are we only examining the gospels?

First, *theologically*, they are at the heart of the Christian faith. Uniquely, the Christian faith claims to be rooted in historical events (unlike any other religion). And the most important historical events are those concerning the life, teaching, death and res of Jesus. So of course the historicity of the gospels is crucial.

Second, *practically*, it's simpler and more manageable to understand the reliability of the *gospels* (and of the New Testament) than the Old Testament. There are loads of compelling reasons to trust the OT, but it's just a more complicated story. So we're going to limit our enquiry.

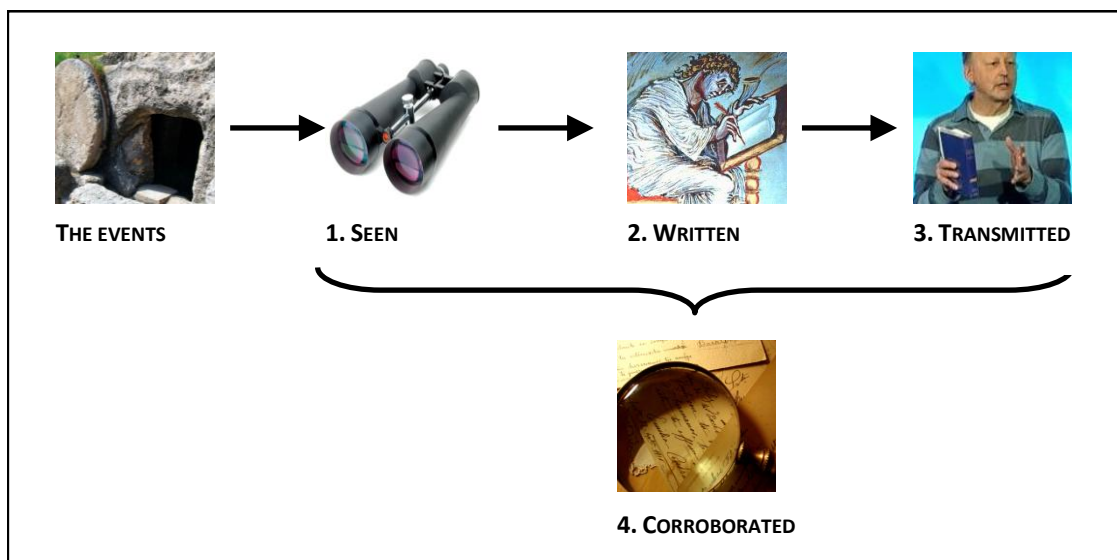
Third, *polemically*: it's the gospels that are particularly under assault. And so it's the gospels that Christian people need to be able to defend.

(c) What is it we're going to examine?

Remember the sort of question we're trying to answer:

- What really happened in New Testament times? What *are* the events of the gospel – and what do they mean?
- Are the gospels that we read in our Bibles a reliable record of those events back then?

We're going to look together at this process – the one I've tried to capture in this little diagram:



What is it that we're going to do in the remainder of our time this week and then over the next two sessions is to test four stages in the argument:

1. Seen: the gospels contain eyewitness testimony
2. Written: the eyewitnesses' testimony was quickly accurately recorded
3. Transmitted: the gospels have been reliably transmitted to us (such that when a Christian today speaks from the Gospels he is indeed speaking about those same events which took place in Palestine nearly 2,000 years ago).
4. Corroborated: we'll see some of the ways in which the gospels are corroborated, both from within the Bible and externally.

(d) Questions

We aren't going to begin digging into those four areas right now. Next time we're going to look at stages 1 and 2. Then in a fortnight move on to stages 3 and 4.

But for now let's take some questions:

- Clarification: anything unclear so far?
- Hopes: are there particular things you'd like us to cover over the next two weeks?

Lastly, let me leave you with a challenge...

(e) A challenge! Let the Bible inform us about the Bible

"Let the Bible inform us about the Bible." What do I mean by that?

Sometimes folk will ask "Is there evidence OUTSIDE the Bible that should persuade me to believe what is written INSIDE the Bible. "

That's a reasonable question. We're going to look at some of that evidence together. It's actually quite compelling.

However, let me raise a question.

- If you're enquiring into the Christian faith why don't you make it your mission to read some of the Bible. Why do we want to set the Bible to one side? Yes, it has a vested interest. But it is the best evidence to hand.
- If you're helping a friend look into the Christian faith why don't you make it your prayerful aim to encourage them to take up this challenge: to read some of the Bible.

As we finish up we're going to listen to a few passages from the Bible. We'll come back to these next week. They're passages which speak of certainty and of truthfulness:

- Luke 1:1-4
- John 21:24
- 1 John 1:1-3

And let me pray again that prayer with which we began:

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

Useful resources

Introductory

Is the New Testament history? Paul Barnett

The Christ files: how historians know what they know about Jesus, John Dickson (book and DVD)

The Da Vinci Code: from Dan Brown's fiction to Mary Magdalene's faith, Garry Williams

The truth about Jesus: the challenge of evidence, Paul Barnett

Bethinking.org – various resources

Advanced

Jesus and the gospels: an introduction and survey, Craig Blomberg

Jesus and the eyewitnesses: the gospels as eyewitness testimony, Richard Bauckham

A new Eusebius: documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD337, J. Stevenson and W.H.C. Frend

An introduction to New Testament textual criticism, J. Harold Greenlee

A textual commentary on the Greek New Testament, B.M. Metzger

The Old Testament documents: are they reliable and relevant? Walter C. Kaiser Jr