

Who Wrote the Gospels?

Dr. Timothy McGrew
St. Michael Lutheran Church
January 23, 2012

Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you. Deuteronomy 32:7

Introduction

The distinction between *authenticity* and *genuineness*

An ancient historical work is *authentic* if it gives a substantially truthful account of the events it reports. It is *genuine* if it was actually written by the person to whom it is attributed.

Authenticity is what we want in a historical document: we want to know if what it says is *substantially true*.

Showing that the document is *genuine* helps to establish that it is *authentic*, because it helps to rule out rival theories (e.g., that the document is a late mythical composition).

Goals of this talk:

1. To examine some of the external evidence for the genuineness of the Gospels.
2. To consider the principal arguments of some people who dispute the genuineness of the Gospels.

The Attack on the Gospels

Bart Ehrman

"[S]ome books, such as the Gospels, ... had been written anonymously, only later to be ascribed to certain authors who probably did not write them (apostles and friends of the apostles)."
—Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* (2011), pp. 101-02.

Richard Dawkins

"[T]he 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."

"Nobody knows who the four evangelists were, but they almost certainly never met Jesus personally."

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006)

Assessing the Genuineness of the Gospels

External tests

- Attributions of authorship
- Early use in other works
- Integration with other historical sources

Internal tests

- Overall consistency
- Undesigned coincidences
- Other internal marks of authenticity (“fingerprints” of the author)

Tonight, we will cover several of these points in detail; others will be covered much more fully in upcoming Monday night talks.

Attributions of Authorship

Augustine’s criterion

Why does no one doubt the genuineness of the books attributed to Hippocrates?

“[B]ecause there is a succession of testimonies to the books from the time of Hippocrates to the present day, which makes it unreasonable either now or hereafter to have any doubt on the subject. How do we know the authorship of the works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Varro, and other similar writers, but by the unbroken chain of evidence?”

—Augustine, *Against Faustus* 33.6 (~AD 400)

Early attestations of authorship of the four Gospels

Each of the following writers and documents either names or describes the authors of one or more of the Gospels:

- Tertullian of Carthage (~207)
- Clement of Alexandria (~180)
- Irenaeus of Lyons (~180)
- Muratorian Fragment (~170)
- Justin Martyr (~150)
- Papias of Hierapolis (~125)

The evidence of Tertullian (~207)

The Gospels were written by Matthew and John, who were apostles, and Luke and Mark, who were “apostolic men.” Mark’s Gospel is the record of Peter’s preaching.

They tell the same basic facts about Jesus, including his virgin birth and his fulfillment of prophecy.

They bore the names of their authors from antiquity, and the ancient churches vouch for them and no others.

The evidence of Clement of Alexandria (~180)

Mark wrote his Gospel, by request, from his knowledge of Peter's preaching at Rome

Matthew and Luke were published first; they are the Gospels containing the genealogies.

John's Gospel was the last one to appear. It was written at the urging of his friends.

The evidence of Irenaeus of Lyons (~180)

Matthew's Gospel was the first one written; it was originally written in the "Hebrew dialect."

Mark, a disciple of Peter, handed down in his Gospel what Peter had preached.

Luke, a companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him.

John, the disciple of the Lord, published a Gospel while living at Ephesus in Asia.

Note: Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was himself a disciple of the apostle John. So at this point, there is only one human link separating our source from the lifetime of one of Jesus' apostles.

The Muratorian Fragment (~170)

The early part of this text is lost, but virtually all scholars agree that it referred to Matthew and Mark.

Luke, the physician and companion of Paul, wrote his Gospel from the reports of others, since he had not personally seen Jesus.

John, who was an eyewitness, wrote his Gospel after the rest, at the urging of some friends.

The evidence of Justin Martyr (~150)

The Christians possessed "memoirs" of Jesus, which were also called "Gospels."

These were written by apostles and by those who were their followers.

They tell us of such events as the visit of the Magi at Jesus' birth and his agony in Gethsemane.

Note: Justin's pupil, Tatian, produced a harmony of our four Gospels, the *Diatessaron*. It contains nearly the whole text of our four Gospels (leaving out Jesus' genealogies); it contains nothing else. The name "Diatessaron" means "through four," which advertises its intention to combine the four Gospels—our four Gospels—into a single narrative.

The evidence of Papias (~125)

Mark, having been the interpreter of Peter, wrote down what Peter had preached accurately, though not necessarily in order.

Matthew wrote the λόγια (“oracles”—a reference to his whole Gospel? to the sayings of Jesus?) in the Hebrew language.

Summary of the attestation of authorship:

The attestation of authorship is not only significant and early, it is also geographically diverse, coming from every quarter of the Roman empire.

Tertullian in Carthage
Clement in Alexandria
Irenaus in France
Papias in Asia Minor

There is no rival tradition of authorship for *any* of the four Gospels.

Early Use of the Gospels

Preliminary observations

Many early writers make use of the Gospels without naming or describing their authors.

This evidence takes us back even earlier than the evidence of attribution.

For these authors to make use of the Gospels as authoritative sources means that they expected their audience to recognize their quotations and allusions and to accept them as authentic.

A few examples of early use of the Gospels

Ignatius, Letter to Polycarp (~107): “In all circumstances be ‘wise as a serpent,’ and perpetually ‘harmless as a dove.’” Cf. Matt. 10:16

Polycarp, Letter to the Philippians (~108): “[B]lessed are the poor and those persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.” Cf. Luke 6:20

Basilides, Gnostic heretic (~125): “That each man has his own appointed time, he says, the Savior sufficiently indicates when he says, ‘My hour is not yet come.’” Cf. John 2:4

Basilides: “... this, he says, is what is mentioned in the Gospels: ‘He was the true light, which lights every man coming into the world.’” Cf. John 1:9

Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (~95): “Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus which He spake, ‘As ye give, so it shall be given you;’” “With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you;” “Woe to that man! It were better that he were not born than that he should offend one of My elect: it were better that a millstone were hanged about him and he were

drowned in the sea than that he should offend one of My little ones.” Cf. Matthew 7:2 / Mark 4:24 / Luke 6:38, on the one hand, and Matthew 8:6 / Mark 9:42 / Luke 17:2, on the other

Note in particular the extensive use of the New Testament in Polycarp, who writes within a decade or so of the death of the Apostle John and was one of John’s disciples:

Matthew	Galatians
Mark	Ephesians
Luke	Philippians
Acts	1 Thessalonians
Romans	2 Thessalonians
1 Corinthians	Hebrews
2 Corinthians	1 Peter

. . . and more . . .

Summary of the Early Use of the Gospels

The four Gospels and Acts are used copiously by the early church fathers, taking us back to within the lifetime of the Apostle John himself.

Even heretics tacitly acknowledged their genuineness, which they would not have done if they could help it.

The evidence from the early use of the Gospels is overwhelming.

Note what Justin Martyr (~150) tells us about the reading of Scripture:

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; . . .” —*First Apology*, ch. 67

For the Gospels to be read as Scripture in weekly services, they must have been extremely highly regarded and well known to Christians throughout the world. Such high regard takes time to filter through a community.

The Accusations of Critics who Deny the Genuineness of the Gospels

Objection #1, from Matthew’s use of the third person pronoun

“Matthew’s Gospel is written completely in the third person, . . . Even when this Gospel narrates the event of Matthew being called to become a disciple, it talks about ‘him,’ not about ‘me.’” —Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*

Matthew 9:9: As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

Around the year AD 400, Augustine encountered *this very argument* from the Manichean Faustus.

“Faustus thinks himself wonderfully clever in proving that Matthew was not the writer of this Gospel, because, when speaking of his own election, he says not, He saw me, and said to me, Follow me; but, He saw him, and said to him, Follow me. This must have been said either in ignorance or from a design to mislead. Faustus can hardly be so ignorant as not to have read or heard that narrators, when speaking of themselves, often use a construction as if speaking of another. It is more probable that Faustus wished to bewilder those more ignorant than himself, in the hope of getting hold on not a few unacquainted with these things.” —Augustine, *Against Faustus* 17.1.4

Augustine is right:

“There was in the army a certain Xenophon, an Athenian, who accompanied the army neither as a general nor as a captain nor as a private soldier; but Proxenos, an old acquaintance, had sent for him.” —Xenophon, *Anabasis* 3.1. See also *Anabasis* 1.8.15; 2.5.40; 3.1.10, 47, etc.

See also Caesar’s *Commentaries*, Josephus’s *Jewish War*, Nicolaus’s *History*, Dexippus’s *Scythica*, etc.

Bottom line: Not only is Bart Ehrman wrong, he was shown to be wrong more than 1600 years ago.

Objection #2: Supposed Tension between Matthew and John

“In Matthew, there is not a word about Jesus being God; in John, that’s precisely who he is.”
—Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*

Checking Matthew on this claim:

Matthew 1:3: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

Isaiah 9:6: For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Matthew 3:3: For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

Isaiah 40:3: A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

LORD = יהוה, YHWH—the ineffable name of God, so sacred that devout Jews will not pronounce it when reading the Scriptures, substituting “Adonai” instead.

Matthew 9:2-6: And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” ... “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”

Bottom line: Bart Ehrman is wrong about the supposed tension between Matthew and John

Objection #3: An Alleged Mistake concerning Jewish Customs and Ritual Purification

“[T]heir ignorance of Palestinian geography and Jewish customs suggests they composed their works somewhere else in the empire . . . Mark 7:3 indicates that the Pharisees ‘and all the Jews’ washed their hands before eating, so as to observe ‘the tradition of the elders.’ This is not true: most Jews did not engage in this ritual.”

Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*

What is the evidence that they did not?

In Exodus 30:18-21; 40:30-32 and Leviticus 20:1-16, the priests are called to observe hand washing practices, but the people in general are not.

Ehrman assumes that if the Jews did not *have* to practice such rituals according to the Mosaic law, then most of them would not do so.

But *did* the Jews of Jesus’ time, who were heavily influenced by the Pharisees, engage in the practice even though the written Law did not require it of them?

John 2:6: Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Perhaps John, too, is just in error about Jewish practices?

Some Jewish evidence

“And as is the custom of all the Jews, they washed their hands in the sea and prayed to God, ...” — *Letter of Aristeas* (~200 BC), sec. 305

The law “does not look upon those who have even touched a dead body, which has met with a natural death, as pure and clean, until they have washed and purified themselves with sprinklings and ablutions; ...” Philo (~AD 30), *The Special Laws* 3.205

See also the Mishnah, tractates *m. Yadayim* 1.1-2.4, *m. Hagigah* 2.5-6, etc.

A contemporary scholarly opinion:

“The centrality of impurity to Jewish life in the Second Temple period is supported by archaeological evidence. . . . in Palestine the removal of impurity was not a rite reserved only for approaching the sacred precincts of the Temple, but was common practice for Jews of all walks of life. The use of these immersion pools was common to the priest and the Israelite, the rich and the poor, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the sectarians from Qumran. . . . the textual evidence suggests that the Jews of the Diaspora also purified themselves, if not through immersion, then by sprinkling, splashing or hand washing.”

—Susan Haber, *“They Shall Purify Themselves”*: *Essays on Purity in Early Judaism* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), pp. 130-31

Bottom line: Bart Ehrman is wrong about widespread ritual washing among the Jews in Jesus’ day.

This talk is the first in a projected series:

1. Who Wrote the Gospels?
2. External Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (tentative date: February 13)
3. Internal Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (tentative date: February 27)
4. Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels
5. Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels
6. The Resurrection of Jesus

If you enjoyed it, please come back for some of the other talks!

Meanwhile, if you would like more to read, please check out the free resources at

The Library of Historical Apologetics

<http://historicalapologetics.org>