

The Evangelists' Testimony of Christ: Assessing Their Biographic Record

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Introduction

The gospel narratives bring light to the world in that they lead us into the deeds, life or inner workings of Jesus Christ. They tell of his preexistence, birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension back to glory. Although they give their narrations from different perspectives¹, they speak the same language worth our collective attention (Berkhof, 1932). Some however dispute that the gospels are a genuine record of Jesus. They even go so far as to argue that the four gospel narratives were doctored or so badly corrupted that they cannot possibly be trusted. What is the Christian to make of such assertions? Is it right to bury one's head in the sand or face the criticism head on? This paper gives an over view of the four gospels and what parameters may be used to weigh the veracity of the gospel narratives as we have them today.

The Gospels (synoptic and John)

The gospels all tell the story of Jesus, his birth, life and Ministry till he died and rose from the dead. All the gospels have a similar story line though told from different perspectives. Three of these i.e. Matthew, Luke and Mark are so similar and thus classified differently from the fourth gospel. These four gospels are the only authentic write up telling the biography of Jesus though sketchy in some places but ultimately tell one story. They tell the nativity story (except John) and then become silent until Jesus is twelve at the Temple. There is another silent part until Jesus enters Ministry at age 30. From then onwards, the life of Jesus is told in some level of detail until he is taken up to Heaven. Although other 'gospels' claim to have existed, they were not accepted as authentic by the early church given a particular criteria. For instance, the authentic gospels were accepted as such by the early church and never perceived as spurious. For another thing, they were written by an Apostle or one so closely associated with them. For example, Mark is believed by some to have been written by John Mark under the supervision of an apostle. The same goes with Matthew who used to be a tax collector. Luke was probably written by a Gentile person but was closely connected with the Apostles and most probably based his narrative on the extant

¹ Even their arrangement of material differs from narrator to narrator

materials. John of course was the disciple whom Jesus loved and wrote from a very unique angle, potently demonstrating who Jesus exactly is. He points out that Jesus was more than just a mere man, hence his anatomical write up.

Each of these gospels has a target readership in mind and thus fashioned to achieve those ends. Mark is written for the Gentile community, probably the potency seeking Romans, to demonstrate that Jesus is a mighty savior and thus gives a quick successive narrative highlighting the miraculous (Greenleaf, 1995). Matthew is meant for the Jewish readership and thus commences with a detailed Genealogy and then proceeds to give details. Luke is a medical Doctor and aims at Gentiles within the Hellenistic or larger Roman world, among whom was the suspected eminent Theophilus, to whom he primarily addressed his gospel after undertaking a most meticulous research. (Luke 1:1-2; Acts 1:1-3). John appeals to the Jewish mind although addresses the entire world. He takes time to explain some detail as well as gives some timeline to his narratives. Put together, the respective gospels give a pretty good picture of who Jesus really is.

But then, the gospels were written at different times with the last being the Gospel of John about AD 90 (Hale 1996). The date of writing is not exact but approximate, with a good reason.

Finally, the picture of Jesus is established by the testimony of at least four witnesses, three of whom were likely Jewish.

The synoptic gospels

The synoptic gospels are those that are said to be very similar as earlier hinted at above. They have a similar story line and in some cases almost quote verbatim from another evangelist. This has led some scholars to hypothesize that one gospel writer had access to the other and used it to compile his work. For instance, some claim that Mark was probably written first and then used by the author of Matthew to compile their account. Others have argued that Mark is a summary of Matthew's gospel. The debate continues. Luke is believed to have been derived from the already existing materials including oral traditions. This is strengthened by the fact that Luke does not claim to have been a firsthand witness to what Jesus did but based his work on carefully research work from those that were eye witnesses to the facts before hand. They are thus dubbed 'synoptic' in the sense that they are believed to tell the same story and derived from each other in some way. The synoptic gospels then are Matthew, Mark and Luke. If one reads a gospel and then goes to the next, it 'feel' similar or same to the previous one except that Mark does not have a Genealogy. Luke and Matthew both have but have some differences at some point, depending on which ancestry line one follows.

Gospel of John

As earlier hinted at, the gospel of John is not considered one of the synoptics for obvious reasons, it is written from a totally different angle and yet telling the same story. It gives some insights which other gospels do not such as the reason for the Miracles, the person and nature of Jesus among others. John also demonstrates an affinity for and intimacy to Jesus, as having interacted with him in person. He further shows it in his epistle when he states that he had not only seen Jesus in the flesh but touched and in a sense spoke to him. John shows that Jesus is the eternal son of God that existed before the world begun and this returned to his eternal abode after he had accomplished the work of redemption. The evangelist appears to be a master at telling his story and eloquently tells it in a way that readers are left in no doubt as to who Jesus really was.

Evidence from the Evangelists' narratives

From the evangelists' narratives, it is clear that Jesus existed and came to save his people. His existence is taken for granted and so his life and death. All the gospels show that Jesus was a full human being that walked the face of the earth despite his miraculous birth to a virgin. All the narratives, from different perspectives though, do tell the passion of Christ, his death and resurrection on the third day. The details which each narrator give may vary but the total picture is uniform building an argument for whoever would doubt. They all talk about his resurrection and ascension into Heaven with the Great commission appended, though Marks' narrative has generated some controversy. But even if the last part of Mark chapter 16 were removed, it never changes the story line or the conclusion. So, taken together, the gospels give a very solid argument for the authenticity of Jesus as it was initially told. Documentary evidence (whether internal or external), whether Christian or not, points to the fact that Jesus was and rose again (Whiston 1998). He has ascended to glory from where all the original 4 gospel narrators expect him to emerge as Judge rather than savior.

Why the narratives are to be relied upon

According to FF Bruce (2003), the gospel narratives are authentic because both internal and external evidence attests to their viability. The unity and consistency within the narratives are remarkable. The alleged differences are only apparent and if anything, prove that the gospels were never doctored to project an unrealistic or mythological legendary image of Jesus, if at all he existed. But no, Jesus actually walked the earth and evidence is there for all to see. External evidence from the manuscripts show that the story is consistent has never changed as some spurious gospels and some Muslims claim. Furthermore, the church historians (and may we add, other historians like Josephus or even Pliny) speak the same language with respect to the existence and authenticity of the

gospels. The Apostolic and Church fathers extensively quoted from the accepted gospels and their collected writings could reconstruct the entire New Testament, according to Bruce. This is a great advantage of the Gospel narratives, far outstripping all other writings of men, whether Philosopher or religious. From the argument of internal and external evidence, the gospels are thus credible.

What Others have Said and Written about these Narratives

Many people have written on the gospel (i.e. content) or gospels (i.e. existing accepted narratives/books) from different angles. While some set out to discredit the gospel narratives as mere human imaginative stories with impossible miraculous narrations, others write with an objective enquiry examining all the available evidence, internally or externally. This latter group has often arrived at the conviction that the narratives are true and authentic. Simon Greenleaf (1995), a learned counsel initially set out to discredit the gospel narratives but ended up concluding that the narratives were indeed reliable and true. Using his great legal mind, he wrote a paper & book "*Testimony of the Evangelists*" which makes many landmark statements that include the following points:

* The Christian scriptures must be believed and accepted of their own claims to be

1. True
2. Trust worthy
3. Authoritative
4. Infallible though some apparent differences exist among the gospels.

* The Christian has the right to believe as they please but in keeping with standard practice.

* Objectivity and open mindedness is essential in investigating a matter. Most of the available data points to the fact that the gospels are true and accurate.

Lessons Gleaned from this Consideration

Objectively reading through the gospel narratives, one cannot help but conclude that the writers, though writing from different times and places spoke the same thing, albeit from different perspectives. We may thus highlight some important points derived from the research as given below:

- The gospel of Mathew is named after one Matthew often called Levi. He was a Jew and therefore wrote for a Jewish readership.
- Mathews' gospel is believed to have been written originally in Hebrew but later translated. It is also believed to be longer version from which mark was derived or vice versa.
- Matthew was written probably around AD 37-64²
- It appears Matthew spoke both Hebrew and Greek and probably educated as a tax collector.
- Mark's gospel is attributed to several people including John Mark.
- Marks' gospel is the most brief and written for a Gentile audience, hence the emphasis on the miraculous to prove that Jesus is indeed a mighty saviour.
- Some suggest that Mark could have been the preamble of Matthew's gospel or is a summary of it, hence suspected to have been derived from the gospel of Matthew. The reason is the similarities of several narrations.
- Others believe that the apostle Peter is the ultimate author who dictated what was written to Mark in relation to Jesus' ministry.
- Luke was written by Dr Luke, a Gentile physician.
- The narrative is an accurate and meticulously written orderly account.
- The language in Luke proves that the writer was a physician.
- Despite not having been a direct eye witness, his narration is of high quality and gives accurate narration.
- The gospel of John was written by John believed to have been the youngest amongst the apostles.
- John writes from a different angle but brings home the same core facts about Jesus' ministry. John highlights the incarnation and the fact that Jesus is divine.
- The gospels were written by different individuals in different places.
- The narratives must be accepted as authentic because they bear all the marks of an authentic work.

² Many argue for the latter date for various reasons

- The apostles sincerely preached what they knew, experienced and saw. They were good and honest men.
- The gospels were uniquely written emphasizing different aspects of the same events, not contradictory per se.
- The objectors reject the miraculous aspects of the narratives as being impossible or non-sensible.
- True testimony will naturally conform and is verifiable. Objectivity is weighing the evidence of Christianity from the gospels. This is encouraged rather than being subjective or suspending our mental faculties.
- There is abundant collaborating evidence to prove the veracity and inspiration of the scriptures (Young 1963). For instance, how could four independent writers say the same thing? Further, the writers are sincerely objective leaving the reader to pass the final verdict after facts have been presented clearly.
- There is internal and external evidence to the factual nature of the gospel narratives.
- All evidence is to be examined by a given criteria that is acceptable to all or reasonable. When the narratives are examined by legal principles as to their authenticity, relevance and accuracy, all the narratives pass the test.

The gospel narratives were the work of genuine people, unschooled as some of them were but deep in their insight into the mystery of Christ. The glorious gospel of Christ brings light to the world leading to salvation. Having highlighted some salient points, it's high time we transitioned towards a confident conclusion but then, we highlight the value of this consideration before summing up in the conclusion.

Value of this consideration and Suggested ways to Enhance Appreciation of the Gospel Narratives

This relatively short consideration is vary key to apologetics because it brings alot of key things to the fore. It helps Christians have a good panoramic appreciation of what the Evangelists believed and held with respect to Jesus. They, in unison, share the same view about Christ, despite giving their respective narratives from different angles. It is highly recommended that all saints avail themselves to latest research and evidence often to be found in Journals or recent write ups, say by Josh McDowell. People have invested much to prove the case for a historical Jesus. Interestingly, the narratives themselves are replete

with internal evidence littered within their pages, carefully documented to prove the authenticity of their claims. Readers pleasantly discover these latent and some times hidden gems within the gospels. We would recommend that before resorting to writings of men, readers first read the narratives themselves, several times over to grasp the plot, content and probably discern the aims of the inspired authors. This greatly helps the Church moving the gospel agenda forward.

Conclusion

The writers of the gospels wrote as first hand witnesses save Luke who meticulously researched what was extant in his day. Collectively, the gospel narratives give a fuller and complete picture of Jesus Christ as he walked the earth until he was taken up to glory. The narratives therefore are authentic and reliable since they pass all the testing points.

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