

Paul Copan

"Jesus' Followers Fabricated the Stories and Sayings of Jesus"

1998 - Fall

WHEN MY WIFE AND I VISITED KIEV shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union, we heard a standing joke bandied about concerning two of Russia's most prominent newspapers, Pravda and Izvestia .Pravda means "truth" and Izvestia means "news." Because of the well-known Communist propagandizing and serious distortion in reporting, we were told that there was no pravda in Izvestia and no izvestia in Pravda!

Some critics allege the same can be said about accurately recounting history: If an author has certain convictions or presuppositions, he can't accurately recount history. He is merely spewing propaganda. For instance, Thomas Sheehan, Loyola philosophy professor and author of *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* , maintains that "Jesus did not think he was divine," nor did he "assert any of the messianic claims that the New Testament attributes to him. "1Although Jesus believed himself to be an eschatological prophet, within a half-century the church came to believe he was the divine Son of God. Sheehan argues for these claims in part by saying that because the Gospels are "religious testimonies," they cannot be trusted. 2In the same vein, Hick maintains that "the documents [the Gospels] are all documents of faith." 3The assumption is clear--a faith-perspective distorts history.

On the contrary, holding this view ultimately leads to historical skepticism--because all historians write with a purpose, and Sheehan, though not a historian, is no exception. Purposes extend even to the point of including certain materials and omitting others. If writing with a goal--whether it be evangelistic, apologetic, or didactic--implies propaganda, then all recorded history is propaganda. But most of us recognize that belief shouldn't be confused with reason for belief . In other words, to hold a belief strongly doesn't necessarily imply that the belief is wrong. Instead, the basis for that belief should first be explored; a work shouldn't be dismissed simply because of the strong convictions of the writer. 4Should we discount the factuality or reliability of the accounts of Nazi concentration camp survivors simply because they passionately recount their story? Aren't the Holocaust deniers and revisionists, who can hardly be called dispassionate, the ones who falsify history? 5

Furthermore, this error of Sheehan, Hick, and others fails to distinguish between innocuous presuppositions and vicious ones. Innocuous presuppositions don't end up distorting historical evidence. They don't become the basis of accepting a historical hypothesis. Vicious ones, on the other hand, twist and warp the evidence in a propaganda-like manner. They override the evidence in order to inevitably conclude what was presupposed from the start. This ends up being a vicious circle. 6

And when it comes to the Gospels, the question must be raised: What actually motivated the evangelists to write what and as they did? A good case can be made that it was their own experience with Jesus.

Now when it comes to actually examining the historicity of the Gospels, we see remarkable indications of accuracy. Take John's Gospel, which often isn't accepted as reliable history because it contains more developed theological reflection than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Yet this Gospel reveals a first-century Palestinian background rooted in the Old Testament--as the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed this through, for instance, their reference to "sons of light" and "sons of darkness." It also offers exceptional topographical information that has been repeatedly confirmed archaeologically. John's mention of Jacob's well at Sychar (4:5), the pool of Bethesda (with five porticoes) by the Sheep Gate (5:2), the pool of Siloam (9:7), and Solomon's Colonnade (10:23) have had the strong support of archaeology. In light of the extensive usage of the "witness" theme in this Gospel, the author's emphasis is clear that the incidents included can be relied upon (see 21:24). John is even interested in chronology and specific times (1:29 ,35 ,43 : "the next day"; 4:43 : "after the two days"). John is also familiar with particular cultural understandings such as the relationship between Jews and Samaritans (4:27), the general view of women in society (4:27), or the nature of Sabbath regulations (5:10). 7

So if the reliability of the Gospels can be shown historically and archaeologically, this can, in part, help defuse skepticism and inspire greater confidence regarding, say, the claims or resurrection of Jesus. 8Our first point is

this: When engaging the skeptic, the Christian can offer good reasons for taking the Gospels to be historically reliable. This, then, may provide a platform for speaking about the claims and deeds of Christ . As Craig Blomberg asserts, "Once a historian has proved reliable where verifiable, once apparent errors or contradictions receive plausible solutions, the appropriate approach is to give that writer the benefit of the doubt in areas where verification is not possible." 9

Second, the claim that the early Christian communities read back into Jesus' teachings their own concerns and controversies won't withstand scrutiny . If such matters were invented and projected backward to Jesus to substantiate them, then why are issues such as spiritual gifts (e.g., speaking in tongues [1 Cor. 12, 14]); divorcing when deserted by an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7:15); eating meat offered to idols (1 Cor. 8); or circumcision (Acts 15)--issues that received significant attention in early Christian communities--glaringly absent in Jesus' teaching? These disputes often divided many of the early Christian communities, but we don't find Jesus addressing them. Rather, the epistles and to some extent the book of Acts -- not the teachings of Jesus--inform us of these controversies. So to allege that, in the midst of their disputes and concerns, early Christians fabricated sayings and attributed them to Jesus doesn't square with the New Testament evidence.

Third, the Gospels--primarily Mark, Matthew, and Luke--offer a portrait of Jesus within one generation of his death, which tends to ensure the accurate transmission of the Jesus-tradition . It's taken for granted in New Testament scholarship that Mark's gospel was written first and that Matthew and Luke independently follow Mark as their primary source. 10 Luke's gospel, then, was obviously written before its companion volume (Acts) was.

Now, a very good case can be made for the completing of Acts before a.d. 62-64, 11 when Paul was executed under Nero's order. At the end of Acts, Paul is still under house arrest in Rome. Luke, who was interested in significant events in early Christianity, such as the martyrdom of prominent Christians (e.g., Stephen and James), surely would have included Paul's death had he known about it. The best explanation for Luke's not having mentioned Paul's execution--or, for that matter, the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70 or the Neronian persecution--is that this event hadn't yet taken place. So Acts was in all likelihood written before a.d. 62. 12 So we can assert on good grounds that the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) may well have been written within thirty years of Jesus' death--a period in which the accuracy of these Gospels could be easily checked or challenged by eyewitnesses or inquirers. 13

The early date of these Gospels, besides other factors, gives many conservative scholars confidence that what they recorded is trustworthy. Not only were the Gospel writers interested in recording accurate history (see Luke 1:1-4), first-century Palestinian Jews at the various levels of society were able to memorize large portions of Scripture. Given (1) the importance of memorization and oral tradition in first-century Palestine, (2) the practice of (occasionally) writing down and preserving the teachings of rabbis by their disciples, (3) the fact that the vast majority of Jesus' teaching was in poetic (and easily memorizable) form, (4) the importance and revered status of religious traditions in Palestine, and (5) the presence of apostolic authority in Jerusalem to ensure the accurate transmission of tradition (and to check potential heresy), we have good reason to believe that the material in the Gospels was carefully and correctly set down. 14

Another factor that contributes to the conviction that the Gospels are reliable is the data of some of Paul's writings (Romans , 1 Corinthians , 1 Thessalonians) and James' epistle, all of which pre-date the writing of the Gospels (from the late a.d. 40s through about 57). 15 James' using much material from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) reminds us that Jesus' teachings were being accurately preserved. Besides his familiarity with Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount (for example, in Romans 12:17-21), Paul is familiar with Jesus' words on divorce and remarriage (1 Cor. 7:10 ; compare Mark 10:10-12) and with the tradition of the last supper (1 Cor. 11:23-25 ; compare Luke 22:19-20). Paul is also familiar with the historical Jesus: the virgin birth (Gal. 4:4), his Davidic descent (Rom. 1:3), and being born under the law (Gal. 4:4 , which appears to highlight Jesus' circumcision and presentation in the temple [Luke 2:22-24]), the last supper/passion (1 Cor. 11:23ff.), and the plot to kill Jesus (1 Thess. 2:14-15)--not to mention the historicity of his resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 .16

What cannot be doubted is that many New Testament critics have approached the Gospels with an utterly unjustified skepticism--a skepticism that wouldn't be considered justified in any other branch of ancient history. New Testament scholar R. T. France declares that "at the level of their literary and historical character

we have good reason to treat the Gospels as a source of information on the life and teachings of Jesus, and thus on the historical origins of Christianity." 17 The Greco-Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White--evidently not a Christian--claimed: "It is astonishing that while Greco-Roman historians have been growing in confidence, the twentieth-century study of Gospel narratives, starting from no less promising material, has taken so gloomy a turn." 18

Fourth, the simple, unsophisticated nature of the Gospels attests to their reliability rather than to their being fabrications. It isn't unusual to read skeptics who point out alleged contradictions or lack of harmonization in, say, the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection narratives. 19 But although the numbers of women, for example, differ from Gospel to Gospel, no evangelist asserts that only so many women went to the tomb. And even when it appears in John's Gospel that only Mary Magdalene was at the tomb, she implies that she wasn't alone: "We don't know where they have put him" (John 20:2).

Now, even if actual discrepancies existed in the Gospels, no good historian rejects a document because of conflicts in secondary matters. What is beyond doubt is that there is a general core of agreement among the Gospels. In any event, it's clear that the Gospel writers were not plotting or fabricating these stories. Otherwise, they would have attempted to be more uniform in their accounting. For example, a fabricated account most likely would not have relied on women as the first witnesses of the Resurrection because of their typically lower status in Jewish society.

Critics may point to the sudden "shorter" ending of Mark's gospel--at 16:8, where the women leave the angel at the tomb trembling, bewildered, and not speaking to anyone (though various versions continue with verses 9-20, which were added later). Skeptic Randel Helms calls this "one of the strangest and most unsatisfying moments in all the Bible." 20 As we will see again later on, however, this ending meshes quite well with Mark's emphasis on the fact that the nature of Jesus' messiahship couldn't be understood apart from his death. While Jesus would warn people, "See that you say nothing to anyone," in order to not perpetuate misunderstanding, the women ironically "said nothing to anyone" (16:8), even though Jesus had fulfilled his mission on the cross and, according to the angel, had been raised from the dead. They kept silent when they no longer needed to! What Mark attempts to do in his gospel is call his audience, by way of pastoral encouragement, to persevere despite past failure and disobedience. So in spite of the failure and fear of the disciples throughout the book--which Mark highlights more than the other Gospel writers--they can derive courage and hope from the promise that Jesus is risen and will meet them in Galilee (16:6-7). 21

An important criterion that helps us discern the authenticity of Jesus' sayings and deeds and thus the reliability of the Gospels is the "criterion of embarrassment"--actions or sayings of Jesus that would have embarrassed or caused difficulty for the early church. In other words, why would the early church fabricate what it knew to be potentially embarrassing incidents? 22 For example, Jesus submits to baptism by the "unworthy" John the Baptist (Mark 1:4-11). 23 Another example is that Jesus didn't know the time of his return (Mark 13:32). According to Christian orthodoxy, Jesus, being divine, could have known the date of his return before his death and resurrection, but he voluntarily relinquished this information as part of his earthly mission. So why would the early church take pains to invent a saying of Jesus that would bring possible embarrassment? We could also add incidents such as Jesus' cursing a fig tree (Mark 11:12-14), allowing unclean spirits to enter swine and immediately destroy them (Luke 8:32-33), his family's believing he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21), the sometimes unimpressive results of his ministry (Mark 6:5-6 ;John 6:66), and his refusal to do miracles (Matt. 13:58).

Furthermore, early Jewish Christians wouldn't likely have concocted stories of miracles to defend Jesus' messiahship; it simply wouldn't have helped their case. Most Jews expected the Messiah to be a king, a political deliverer, a shepherd over Israel--not a miracle-worker:" Messianic beliefs simply did not require a prospective Messiah to heal and exorcise demons. Therefore, one should hardly expect early Christians to find it necessary to create such a large number of miracle stories. "24 Not only this, but such a good crop of miracle stories probably didn't originate in the early church because Jesus periodically refused to perform miracles to simply astonish his audience (Mark 6:1-6 ;Matt. 13:58). This fact--an element of the criterion of embarrassment--could have been viewed, then, as his inability to perform them. 25 It is unlikely that the authors would have risked the "embarrassment" of recording such things if they weren't factually accurate.

At the beginning of this section, we argued that the Christian cannot simply say to the skeptic," But the

Gospels say Jesus made unique claims about himself" because the skeptic will no doubt raise questions about the very reliability of the Gospels. We have laid out some of the reasons for taking the Gospels to be generally reliable. Although much more could be said, the Gospels'--and New Testament's--massive manuscript evidence, their historical reliability, the straightforward and simple nature of the Gospel narratives, and other factors allow us to move forward to the claims of Jesus of Nazareth. Having noted the reasonable evidence to accept the Gospel tradition, we can move to issues surrounding Jesus' uniqueness.

Deflating "Jesus' Followers Fabricated the Stories and Sayings of Jesus."

To say that one writes with an evangelistic or apologetical purpose doesn't mean what is written is unreliable. Passion or zeal--as with the Holocaust survivors--need not entail distortion of data.

Point out places where the Gospels show themselves to be reliable historically and archaeologically. This lends credibility to what cannot be directly verified--Jesus' claims and deeds.

Early Christians didn't read back into Jesus' teachings their own concerns and issues:

1. Many of the controversial issues in the epistles aren't even mentioned in the Gospels (circumcision, speaking in tongues, eating meat offered to idols, etc.).
2. Matthew, Mark, and Luke offer a portrait of Jesus within one generation of his death. Note the case of Acts, which was likely written before Paul's death (ca . a.d. 64), which means that Luke's gospel was written earlier than this and that Mark, which Luke follows, was written even earlier.
3. First-century Palestinian Jews were concerned about accurately preserving tradition, and this concern is reflected in the epistles--for example, themes from the Sermon on the Mount are reflected in James and the tradition of the Last Supper is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11 .
4. The Gospels do not reflect a fabrication. There is a simplicity to them, making fabrications unlikely. (Note the women as witnesses of Jesus' resurrection despite their lower societal status, or the "embarrassing" points that would probably be deleted if the Gospel stories or sayings were fabricated--Jesus' baptism by John, his ignorance of the time of his own return, his not doing miracles in some places).
5. Why invent so many miracle stories, when most Jews expected a political deliverer as Messiah, not a wonder-worker?

Footnotes:

1. (New York: Random House, 1986), 5.
2. *The First Coming* , 6.
3. "A Pluralist View," in *More Than One Way?* , 35. (The Jesus Seminar takes a similar approach.)
4. Goetz and Blomberg, "The Burden of Proof," 42-45.
5. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" 36-37.
6. William Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence* , xvi-xvii.
7. Thomas D. Lea, "The Reliability of History in John's Gospel," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (Sept. 1995): 387-402.
8. Admittedly, historical and archaeological support provide partial evidence for reliability. In some cases, one may be warranted in arguing for a very restricted reliability claim (limited to a specific passage).
9. "Gospels (Historical Reliability)," 297.
10. At a popular level, see Robert Stein's *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1987).
11. See Colin J. Hemer's defense of this date in his *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* , Conrad H. Gempf, ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 365-410.
12. Some conservative scholars, however, would take a later date for certain theological reasons. See David John Williams, *Acts NIBC* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990), 11-13.
13. See Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* , 308-364. See also Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" in *Jesus Under Fire* , 29. For an introduction to the issues surrounding the dating of the Gospels, note D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992).
14. Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* , 25: "The importance of memorization

- in first-century Jewish society is undeniable, and we are justified in thinking that this provides a sufficient basis for the careful and accurate oral tradition of gospel material." The German evangelical from Tübingen, Rainer Riesner, has documented this in his "Jüdische Elementarbildung und Evangelienüberlieferung," in R. T. France and David Wenham, eds., *Gospel Perspectives I* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980): 209-223. He has expanded upon this in his *Jesus als Lehrer* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981).
15. This dating is more disputed, however.
 16. For a wealth of documentation on the many connections between Jesus and Paul, see David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995); also, Gary Habermas, "The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus," in Gary R. Habermas and R. Douglas Geivett, eds., *In Defense of Miracles* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
 17. R. T. France, "The Gospels as Historical Sources for Jesus, the Founder of Christianity," *Truth* 1 (1985): 86.
 18. *Roman Society and Roman Law* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1978 repr.), 187.
 19. For plausible harmonizations of the Resurrection narratives, see George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), 91-93; Murray Harris, *Three Crucial Questions About Jesus*, 107-109; William Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 307-309; John Wenham, *Easter Enigma* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1992).
 20. *Gospel Fictions* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1989), 133.
 21. A. T. Lincoln, "The Promise and the Failure: Mark 16:7-8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 283-300.
 22. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 168-171. See Meier's discussion on the merits of other criteria such as discontinuity, multiple attestation, coherence, and rejection and execution.
 23. See "Jesus the Baptist?" by R. T. France in Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 94-111.
 24. Craig Evans, "Life-of-Jesus Research and the Eclipse of Mythology," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 28.
 25. *Ibid.*, 29. Mark's language explicitly suggests this!