

How can we know that the Gospels are true?

The issue of the historical reliability of the entire bible is too major of a topic to deal with here. There are parts of the bible, such as the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, that nearly every Christian would say contain some passages that are meant to symbolically communicate truth and aren't meant to be read as absolute, literal history. But there are parts of the bible where the issue of historical accuracy is extremely important. If it isn't reasonable to believe that Jesus really rose from the dead, then there isn't any point in bothering with this Church stuff.

When we say the creed at mass we state that "We believe...he (Jesus) suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the scriptures." If we're not right when we say this, then everything having to do with Christianity falls apart.

So is it reasonable to believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead? This is the key question when it comes to the historical reliability of the bible and the truth of the Gospels.

Did the apostles make it up?

First of all we have to ask ourselves if the apostles made it up. This is extremely unlikely. Of the twelve original apostles eleven were left after the death of the traitor Judas. He was replaced by a man named Matthias. St. Paul was called an apostle, and wrote thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the bible. Of these 13 men, 12 were executed for their Christian faith. The other, St. John the Apostle, is believed to have died while

imprisoned on the island of Patmos off of the coast of Turkey. So the one who died on a prison island was the one who got the best deal for being a Christian. These men were persecuted because their belief in the resurrection of Christ was seen by others as a threat to pre-existing religious beliefs, or as causing them to belong to a dangerous new group that was a political threat. They all could have saved themselves from imprisonment, torture, and death if they had said that they were making up. If they had said Jesus had not really risen from the dead, they had made it up, and they were willing to help those who were persecuting Christians they undoubtedly could have saved their lives. All of them suffered greatly rather than do this. So it is clear that they really believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If they had made it up because they thought this was something that would in some way benefit them they would not have stuck to this story in the face of brutal persecution. It would have made absolutely no sense for them to do that.

Some people have suggested that as part of this fraud the followers of Jesus stole his body from the tomb and then claimed that he had risen from the dead. This would have been extremely difficult to do, and this possibility seems to be done away with by the fact that if they had done this that they would have confessed to it in the face of torture and the threat of death.

Another possibility is that they were fooled. Could something have happened that would have led them to believe Jesus had risen from the dead, even though this hadn't really happened? Just because someone believes something to be true, as the apostles did when it came to the resurrection of Jesus, doesn't always mean that this is really the case. Maybe they were sincere, but wrong, in their beliefs.

Maybe Jesus didn't really die.

Some people have claimed that maybe Jesus didn't die on the cross. Maybe he only passed out. So when he left his tomb he wasn't rising from the dead, he was just waking up. Realistically there is no way that this is the case. The whipping Jesus received before being crucified would have been so brutal that his muscles and organs may have been visible. Being crucified dislocated both shoulders. Nerves in the wrists and feet were destroyed when the nails were driven through. Roman executioners were paid to kill people, and they knew what they were doing. Also, they faced death themselves if they screwed something like this up. So the soldiers would not have allowed someone who had only passed out to be taken off the cross and buried. If somehow this impossible event had occurred Jesus would have been so physically broken by the torture he had endured that he certainly would not have been able to stand, walk, and teach as the resurrection stories have him doing. (see for example Lk 24:13-:35 and John 20:11-21:25) He would have been a broken, crippled mess and would not have fooled anyone into thinking he was the Son of God who had risen from the dead.¹ The idea that the resurrection was faked by Jesus when he passed out and then woke up is not in anyway plausible.

¹ Strobel, Lee., *The Case For Christ*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 195-202.

Maybe those who claimed to see the risen Jesus were hallucinating.

So the apostles didn't make it up, and Jesus really died. So could it be that the stories of the risen Jesus were hallucinations? Maybe those who claimed to see that Jesus after he rose from the dead were crazy. This seems extremely unlikely because so many people claimed to have seen the risen Jesus.² People claimed to have seen Jesus outside of his tomb (John 20:11-:18), walking on the road to a town named Emmaus (Lk 24:13-:32), on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius (John 21:1-:23), on a mountain top in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-:20), and in Jerusalem (Lk 24:33-:49). This is not a complete list of the New Testament accounts of people saying they had seen the risen Jesus. The number of locations in which the risen Jesus appeared, and the number of people who claim to have seen him, just seems to mean that the odds are impossibly low that these were all hallucinations.

² Ibid, 238-240.

Maybe the New Testament texts as we have them haven't been preserved well enough to be trusted.

There is also the objection, that many people raise, that the New Testament is about 2,000 years old and we can't possibly know that the versions we have of it now are accurate. So maybe, the bible we have now has changed too much over the centuries for us to rely on the description of events that it gives us. We don't have original copies of the New Testament. So maybe what we have now is so different from the originals that we can't say whether or not we have reliable versions of them. Maybe everything I've already talked about when it comes to how Jesus died, his empty tomb, and the stories of those who saw him after his resurrection wasn't originally in the bible and is just the result of the stories being changed over the centuries.

This next part is going to be the most complicated part of this argument, but the historical background it provides should prove very helpful. Let's compare the bible to some other ancient texts which most scholars would agree we have accurate translations of. These are books that scholars would have been preserved well enough that our modern editions of them are accurate. One important ancient text is Tacitus's *Annals of Imperial Rome*, which was written in 116 AD. The most ancient copy of one part of this work is from the year 850 A.D. The other part of the book that is still in existence is based on a text from the 11th century. For the 1st century Jewish historian Josephus there is one copy of his book *The Jewish War* from the 4th century, and the next most recent is from the 10th century. The text for which there is the greatest number of ancient editions still in existence is Homer's *Iliad*. There are approximately 650 ancient Greek

manuscripts of this work still in existence. This work was written in approximately 800 B.C. The oldest surviving copies are from the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D.³ So for all of these extremely important texts, and what I just named are some of the absolutely most important books that historians of ancient Greece, Rome, and Israel rely on, there are tremendous gaps between when they were written and when the copies that still exist were produced. It's not these books didn't exist during those centuries, but every copy of them that did has been lost.

The difference when we compare these books to the bible is incredible. The earliest existing copy of a portion of the bible is five verses of the Gospel of John from the year 125 AD. It's only five verses, but to have a copy of even a tiny part of an ancient text from only thirty years after it was written is incredible. There are portions of 12 of the 27 books of the New Testament that have been preserved on texts from right around the year 200 AD. The oldest complete edition of the New Testament that is still in existence is from around the year 350 AD. So we have copies of the New Testament that are still in existence that are closer in date to the original texts than is the case for any other ancient text. Also there are approximately 24,000 biblical manuscripts from the first 1,000 years or so of Christianity that are still in existence. This is an absolutely incredible number when compared to any other ancient text.⁴ The New Testament has been better preserved than any other text from the ancient world. The argument that somehow the bible we have now is substantially different from the bible as it was written does not stand up to well in the face of this sort of evidence.

³ Ibid, 60.

⁴ Ibid, 60-64.

Is there anything that would lead us to believe the New Testament is more reliable than the texts of other major religions?

One of the most important things to keep in mind that when it comes to the New Testament was how quickly it was written in relation to the events it describes. Let's compare Christianity to Buddhism. The Buddha lived in the 6th century BC, but the Buddhist scriptures and the first biography of the Buddha weren't written until the 1st Century A.D.⁵

In contrast the first Christian scriptures were written about twenty years after the earthly ministry of Jesus. The last books of bible were written around 95 AD. The earliest Gospel was probably Mark, which was probably written around the year 70 AD. These dates are generally acknowledged even by non-Christian scholars who study the history of the bible. Some Christian scholars make strong arguments that some books were written even earlier than these dates. So the time span that passed between when Jesus walked on earth and when the New Testament was written is extremely brief.

In contrast many of the so called secret or lost Gospels, the documents that a big deal was made about in *The DaVinci Code* (and in other things written by stupid people) were written at least 30 years later than anything that is contained in the New Testament, and sometimes as much as a century afterwards. 1st century documents can make the claim to have been written by those who personally knew Jesus, or who had been taught by these people. Clearly things written 150 years after Jesus walked the earth can't make the same claim.

⁵ Ibid, 87.

Many of the books of the New Testament books made use of Christians hymns, creeds, prayers, sayings, and texts which existed prior to the books we now have being written. This clearly shows that the New Testament reflects already existing Christian beliefs and practices. The New Testament was not written to tell people about Christ for the 1st time. It was written to provide further instruction to people who had already been taught, mostly by word of mouth, but partly through other Christian documents.

So the New Testament authors couldn't have just started to make stuff up about Jesus. It was too soon after his time of public ministry. There were too many people around who could have argued against their version of events if they had just made it up. If the Jesus they wrote about was different than the Jesus who actually existed they couldn't have gotten away with it. This is completely different than the situation with Buddhism where it took 600 years for things to be put into writing. That's enough time for a lot of things to be exaggerated and changed.

Let's also compare the New Testament to the Koran. Muhammad is dead. No one disputes that. So yes Muhammad taught things and claimed that God had revealed things to him. No one disputes that is what he did and what he claimed. But Muhammad didn't rise from the dead. No one even claims this occurred. So if Jesus was just a teacher his claims would be on the same level as those of Muhammad. But if Jesus was just a teacher, if like Muhammad he did not rise from the dead, people writing within no more than a few decades of his death would not have been able to make the claim that he had risen from the dead. It was too soon to make such a dramatic claim, they wouldn't have gotten away with it. So Muhammad and Jesus both taught. And their teachings were preserved during or very shortly after their lifetimes. But Muhammad is dead, and Jesus

is not. So when it comes to whose claims to be God's messenger are more reliable there isn't much of a contest.