



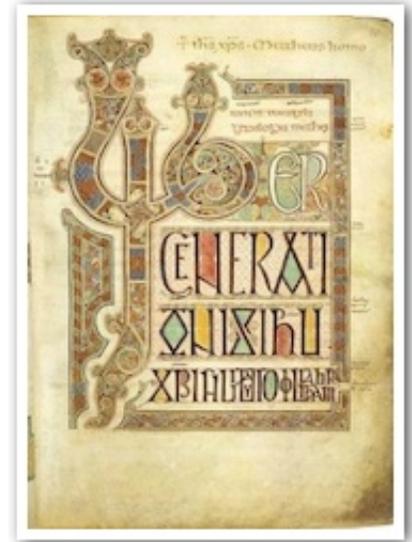
Are the Gospels Myth?

CARL OLSON

So, are the four Gospels "myth"? Can they be trusted as historical records?

January 11, 49 B.C. is one of the most famous dates in the history of ancient Rome, even of the ancient world. On that date Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River, committing himself and his followers to civil war. Few, if any, historians doubt that the event happened. On the other hand, numerous skeptics claim that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are myth and have no basis in historical fact. Yet, as historian Paul Merkley pointed out two decades ago in his article, "The Gospels as Historical Testimony," far less historical evidence exists for the crossing of the Rubicon than does for the events depicted in the Gospels:

There are no firsthand testimonies to Caesar's having crossed the Rubicon (wherever it was). Caesar himself makes no mention in his memoirs of crossing any river. Four historians belonging to the next two or three generations do mention a Rubicon River, and claim that Caesar crossed it. They are: Velleius Paterculus (c.19 B.C. – c.A.D. 30); Plutarch (c.A.D. 46-120); Suetonius (75-160); and Appian (second century). All of these evidently depended on the one published eyewitness account, that of Asinius Pollio (76 B.C.-c. A.D. 4) which account has disappeared without a trace. No manuscript copies for any of these secondary sources is to be found earlier than several hundred years after their composition. (*The Evangelical Quarterly* 58, 319-336)



Merkley observed that those skeptics who either scoff at the historical reliability of the Gospels or reject them outright as "myth" do so without much, if any, regard for the nature of history in general and the contents of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in particular.

The Distinctive Sign

So, are the four Gospels "myth"? Can they be trusted as historical records? If Christianity is about "having faith," do such questions really matter? The latter question is, I hope, easy to answer: Yes, it obviously matters very much if the narratives and discourses recorded by the four evangelists are about real people and historical events. Pope Benedict XVI, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, offers this succinct explanation:

For it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events. It does not tell stories symbolizing suprahistorical truths, but is based on history, history that took place here on this earth. The *factum historum* (historical fact) is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical faith, but the foundation on which it stands: *Et incarnates est* — when we say these words, we acknowledge God's actual entry into real history. (*Jesus of Nazareth*,

xv)

Christianity, more than any other religion, is rooted in history and makes strong — even shocking — claims about historical events, most notably that God became man and dwelt among us. Of course, some Christians of a less-than-orthodox persuasion are content to discard large chunks of the Gospels as unnecessary (or even "offensive") or to interpret as "mythological" or "metaphorical" nearly each and every event and belief described therein. But such is not the belief of the Catholic Church (or of the Eastern Orthodox churches and most conservative Protestants). As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* flatly states: "Belief in the true Incarnation of the Son of God is the distinctive sign of Christian faith" (CCC 463).

It is, ultimately, this distinctive sign — the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was and is truly God and man — that is the focal point of attacks on the historical credibility of the Gospels and the New Testament. Over the past few centuries many historians and theologians have sought to uncover the "historical Jesus" and to peel away the many layers of what they believed were legend and theological accretion. Many abandoned hope that any historical (never mind theological) fact could be extracted from the Gospels.

A Work of Fiction

There were many complex reasons for this state of affairs, one of them being the Enlightenment-era doctrine that purely scientific, objective history could not only be found, but was necessary. Empirical data became for many scholars — men such as Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, and Rene Descartes — the key to all scholarship, including the study of history. It became the accepted wisdom that supernatural or miraculous elements could not be considered scientific and truly historical and that they had to be rejected. Anything outside the realm of empirical data was liable to be labeled "myth" and "legend."

Fast-forward to our day. The results of this approach are all around us, both in the scholarly and popular realm. Not long ago, a young filmmaker named Brian Flemming produced a documentary titled *The God Who Wasn't There*. Its purpose, he explained in an interview, is to demonstrate that the "biblical Jesus" is a myth. Asked to summarize the evidence for this stance, Flemming explained:

It's more a matter of demonstrating a positive than a negative, and the positive is that early Christians appeared not to have believed in a historical Jesus. If the very first Christians appear to believe in a mythical Christ, and only later did "historical" details get added bit by bit, that is not consistent with the real man actually existing . . . I would say that he is a myth in the same way that many other characters people believed actually existed. Like William Tell is most likely a myth, according to many folklorists and many historians. Of course, [Jesus] is a very important myth. I think that he was invented a long time ago, and those stories have been passed on as if they are true. (David Ian Miller, "Finding My Religion," www.sfgate.com)

Here "myth" is synonymous with "fiction" or even "falsehood," reflecting the Enlightenment-era bias against anything bearing even trace amounts of the supernatural. "All I'm saying," remarked Flemming, "is that [Jesus] doesn't exist, and it would be a healthy thing for Christians to look at the Bible as a work of fiction from which they can take inspiration rather than, you know, the authoritative word of God."

"Serious Unicorns"

Thus the Gospels, according to skeptics such as Flemming, are compilations of "nice stories" or "silly tales," just like stories about unicorns and the Easter Bunny. Some skeptics mock Christians for holding fearfully onto childish tales while the truly mature people (self-described by some as "brights") go about the business of making the world a better place. "Meanwhile, we should devote as much time to studying serious theology," stated well-known atheist Richard Dawkins in column in *The Independent* (Dec. 23, 1998), "as we devote to studying serious fairies and serious unicorns." Fellow God-basher Daniel Dennett, in his book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, wrote,

The kindly God who lovingly fashioned each and every one of us and sprinkled the sky with shining stars for our delight — that God is, like Santa Claus, a myth of childhood, not anything [that] a sane, undeluded adult could literally believe in. That God must either be turned into a symbol for something less concrete or abandoned altogether. (18)

Smarter than Thou

Such rhetoric rests both on the assumption that the Gospels are fanciful myth and that the authors of the New Testament (and their readers) were clueless about the difference between historical events and fictional stories. There is an overbearing sense of chronological snobbery at work: We are smarter than people who lived 2,000 years ago. Yet the Second Epistle of Peter demonstrates a clear understanding of the difference between myth and verified historical events: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16). The opening verses of Luke's Gospel indicate that the author undertook the task of writing about real people and events:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. (Luke 1:1-4)

And the fourth Gospel concludes with similar remarks:

This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things which Jesus did: were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:24-25)

These quotations do not, of course, prove the historicity of the New Testament. Rather, they suggest that the authors, far from being knuckle-dragging simpletons, set about to write works depicting real people and events — especially since they believed the narratives they recounted had meaning only if they really did occur. As such, their historical content should be judged not against tales of unicorns and Easter bunnies, but against other first-century works of history and historical narrative.

What Is a Gospel?

The word *gospel* comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning "good news" and refers to the message of Christian belief in the person of Jesus Christ. There has been much scholarly debate about the genre of "gospel" and how it might relate to other forms of writings found in first-century Palestine and the larger ancient world. Obviously, they do contain biographical details, and some scholars have argued in recent years that the gospels are as biographical in nature as anything in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

"The majority of recent specialized studies," writes Evangelical biblical scholar Craig L. Blomberg in *Making Sense of the New Testament*, "has recognized that the closest parallels are found among the comparatively trustworthy histories and biographies of writers like the Jewish historian Josephus, and the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides" (28). In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Catholic theologian and biblical scholar Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis writes:

We must conclude, then, that the genre of the Gospel is not that of pure "history"; but neither is it that of myth, fairy tale, or legend. In fact, *euangelion* constitutes a genre all its own, a surprising novelty in the literature of the ancient world. Matthew does not seek to be "objective" in a scientific or legal sense. He is writing as one whose life has been drastically changed by the encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. Hence, he is proposing to his listeners an objective reality of history, but offered as *kerygma*, that is, as a proclamation that bears personal witness to the radical difference that reality has already made in his life. (*Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word, Vol. II: Meditations on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 44)

These quotations do not, of course, prove the historicity of the New Testament. Rather, they suggest that the authors, far from being knuckle-dragging simpletons, set about to write works depicting real people and events...

Many early Christian authors, such as Justin Martyr, referred to the Gospels as memoirs of the apostles. Blomberg has used the descriptive "theological biographies," which captures well the supernatural and human elements found within them.

The Historical Evidence

Those supernatural elements — especially the miracles of Jesus and his claims to divinity — are, as we've noted, why skeptics call the Gospels "myth" while remaining unruffled about anything written about Julius Caesar and the Rubicon by Velleius Paterculus, Plutarch, Suetonius, and Appian. Yes, Suetonius did write in his account (*Lives of the Twelve Caesars*) about "an apparition of superhuman size and beauty . . . sitting on the river bank, playing a reed pipe" who persuaded Caesar to cross the river, but it has not seemed to undermine the belief that Caesar did indeed cross the Rubicon on January 11, 49 B.C. But, for the sake of argument, let's set aside the theological claims found in the New Testament and take a brief look at the sort of data a historian might examine in gauging the reliability and accuracy of an ancient manuscript.

First, there is the sheer number of ancient copies of the New Testament. There are close to 5,700 full or

partial Greek New Testament manuscripts in existence. Most of these date from between the second to 16th century, with the oldest, known as Papyrus 52 (which contains John 18), dating from around A.D. 100-150. By comparison, the average work by a classical author — such as Tacitus (c. A.D. 56-c. 120), Pliny the Younger (A.D. 61-113), Livy (59 B.C.-A.D. 17), and Thucydides (460-395 B.C.) — has about 20 extant manuscripts, the earliest copy usually several *centuries* newer than the original. For example, the earliest copy of works by the prominent Roman historian Suetonius (A.D. 75-130) date to A.D. 950 — over 800 years after the original manuscripts had been written.

In addition to the thousands of Greek manuscripts, there are an additional 10,000 Latin manuscripts, and thousands of additional manuscripts in Syriac, Aramaic, and Coptic, for a total of about 24,000 full or partial manuscripts of the New Testament. And then there are the estimated one million quotes from the New Testament in the writings of the Church Fathers (A.D. 150-1300). Obviously, the more manuscripts that are available, the better scholars are able to assess accurately what the original manuscripts contained and to correct errors that may exist in various copies.

When Were They Written?

Closely related is the matter of dating. While debate continues as to the exact dating of the Gospels, few biblical scholars believe that any of the four works were written after the end of the first century. "Liberal New Testament scholars today," writes Blomberg, "tend to put Mark a few years one side or the other of A.D. 70, Matthew and Luke — Acts sometime in the 80s, and John in the 90s" (*Making Sense of the New Testament*, 25). Meanwhile, many conservative scholars date the synoptic Gospels (and Acts) in the 60s and John in the 90s. That means, simply, that there exist four accounts of key events in Jesus' life written within 30 to 60 years after his Crucifixion — and this within a culture that placed a strong emphasis on the role and place of an accurate oral tradition. Anyone who denies that Jesus existed or who claims that the Gospels are filled with historical errors or fabrications will, in good conscience, have to explain why they don't make the same assessment about the historical works of Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Julius Caesar, Livy, Josephus, Tacitus, and other classical authors.

That means, simply, that there exist four accounts of key events in Jesus' life written within 30 to 60 years after his Crucifixion — and this within a culture that placed a strong emphasis on the role and place of an accurate oral tradition.

Secondly, historical details are found in the Gospels and the other books of the New Testament. These include numerous mentions of secular rulers and leaders (Caesar Augustus, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Felix, Archelaus, Agrippa, Gallio), as well as Jewish leaders (Caiaphas, Ananias) — the sort of names unlikely to be used inaccurately or even to show up in a "myth." Anglican scholar Paul Barnett, in *Is The New Testament Reliable?*, provides several pages' worth of intersections between biblical and non-biblical sources regarding historical events and persons. "Christian sources contribute, on an equal footing with non-Christian sources," he observes, "pieces of information that form part of the fabric of known history. In matters of historical detail, the Christian writers are as valuable to the historian as the non-Christian" (167).

Then there are the specifically Jewish details, including references to and descriptions of festivals, religious traditions, farming and fishing equipment, buildings, trades, social structures, and religious

hierarchies. As numerous books and articles have shown in recent decades, the beliefs and ideas found in the Gospels accurately reflect a first-century Jewish context. All of this is important in responding to the claim that the Gospels were written by authors who used Greek and Egyptian myths to create a supernatural man-god out of the faint outline of a lowly Jewish carpenter.

Pay Dirt

Various modern archeological discoveries have validated specific details found in the Gospels:

- In 1961 a mosaic from the third century was found in Caesarea Maritima that had the name "Nazareth" in it. This is the first known ancient non-biblical reference to Nazareth.
- Coins with the names of the Herod family have been discovered, including the names of Herod the king, Herod the tetrarch of Galilee (who killed John the Baptist), Herod Agrippa I (who killed James Zebedee), and Herod Agrippa II (before whom Paul testified).
- In 1990 an ossuary was found inscribed with the Aramaic words, "Joseph son of Caiaphas," believed to be a reference to the high priest Caiaphas.
- In 1968 an ossuary was discovered near Jerusalem bearing the bones of a man who had been executed by crucifixion in the first century. These are the only known remains of a man crucified in Roman Palestine, and verify the descriptions given in the Gospels of Jesus' Crucifixion.
- In June 1961 Italian archaeologists excavating an ancient Roman amphitheatre near Caesarea-on-the-Sea (Maritima) uncovered a limestone block. On its face is an inscription (part of a larger dedication to Tiberius Caesar) that reads: "Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judaea."

Numerous other finds continue to demolish the notion that the Gospels are mythologies filled with fictional names and events.

The External Evidence

Third, there are extra-biblical, ancient references to Jesus and early Christianity. Although the number of non-Christian Roman writings from the first half of the first century is quite small (just a few volumes), there are a couple of significant references.

Writing to the Emperor Trajan around A.D. 112, Pliny the Younger reported on the trials of certain Christians arrested by the Romans. He noted that those who are "really Christians" would never curse Christ:

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. (*Letters*, Book 10, Letter 96)

The historian Tacitus, in his *Annals* — considered by historians to be one the finest works of ancient Roman history mentioned how the Emperor Nero, following the fire in Rome in A.D. 64, persecuted Christians in order to draw attention away from himself. The passage is

Third, there are extra-biblical, ancient

noteworthy as an unfriendly source because although Tacitus thought Nero was appalling, he also despised the foreign and, to him, superstitious religion of Christianity:

references to Jesus and early Christianity.

Hence to suppress the rumor, he falsely charged with the guilt, and punished Christians, who were hated for their enormities.

Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius: but the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time broke out again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. (*Annals*, 15:44)

Robert E. Van Voorst, author of *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, offers a detailed analysis of scholarly controversies about this passage, and then states, "Of all the Roman authors, Tacitus gives us the most precise information about Christ" (45). This includes Tacitus's understanding that "Christus" — not Paul or someone else — was the founder of the Christian movement. He notes that Christ was executed under Pilate during the reign of Tiberius, and that Judea was the source of the Christian movement. All of which further confirms the historical reliability of the Gospels.

Conclusion

As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his book on Jesus, there is much that is good about historical-critical and other scientific methods of studying Scripture. But these approaches have limits. "Neither the individual books of Holy Scripture nor the Scripture as a whole are simply a piece of literature" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, xx).

The Christian apologist should not be embarrassed to admit that he has a certain bias when it comes to reading and understanding the Gospels. He should point out that everyone has biases, and that the skeptic's bias against the supernatural and the miraculous shapes how he reads and understands history, especially the historical data found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Christian, in other words, should have no problem with an honest historical examination of the Gospels. But why do so many skeptics shy away from a candid examination of their philosophical biases? That is the question apologists should pose and demand (politely, of course) to be answered.

Further Reading:

[*Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels*](#) by Craig A. Evans

[*The Gospels and the Jesus of History*](#) by Xavier Leon-Dufour, S.J.

"[The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church](#)," Pontifical Biblical Commission (March 18, 1994; available online at www.ewtn.com)

[*Is the New Testament Reliable?*](#) by Paul Barnett

[*The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition*](#) by Paul Rhodes

Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd

[Jesus of Nazareth](#) by Pope Benedict XVI

[Making Sense of the New Testament: Three Crucial Questions](#) by Craig L. Blomberg

[Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Misdemean Popular Culture](#) by J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Carl E. Olson. "Are the Gospels Myth?" *This Rock* vol. 19 no. 3 (March, 2008).

This article is reprinted with permission from *Catholic Answers Magazine* and the author, Carl E. Olson.

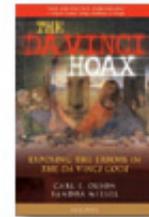
Subscribe to Catholic Answers Magazine [here](#).

This Rock magazine is now *Catholic Answers Magazine*.



THE AUTHORS

Carl E. Olson is the editor of IgnatiusInsight.com. He is the co-author of [The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code](#), [The Da Vinci Hoax: DVD](#) and author of [Will Catholics Be "Left Behind"?](#) He has written for numerous Catholic periodicals and is a regular contributor to *National Catholic Register* and *Our Sunday Visitor* newspapers. He and his wife, Heather, have two children. Their conversion story appears in [Surprised by Truth 3](#). Visit his personal web site at www.carl-olson.com.



Copyright © 2008 [Catholic Answers Magazine](#)